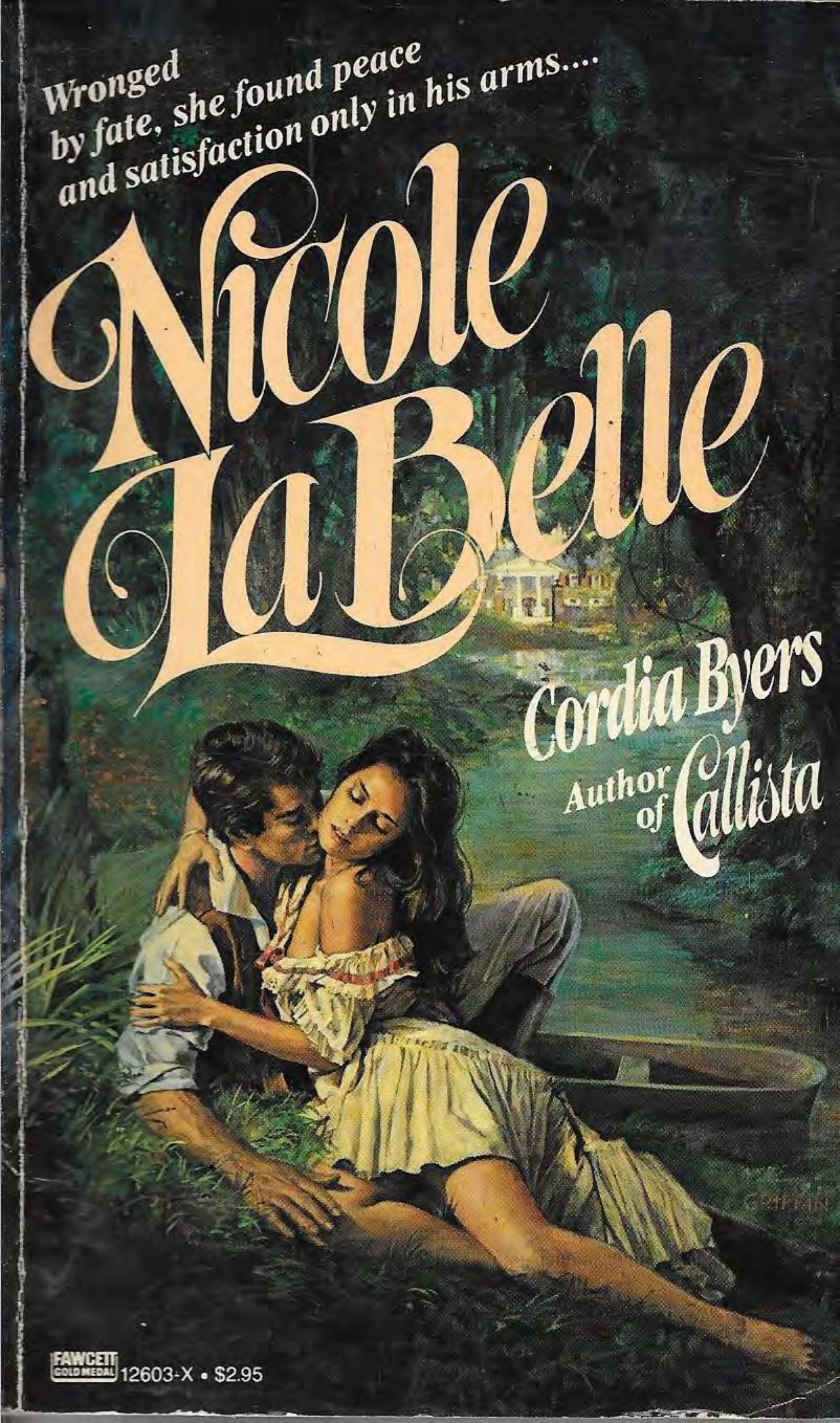




Wronged
by fate, she found peace
and satisfaction only in his arms....

Nicole LaBelle

Cordia Byers
Author of *Callista*



NICOLE LAY BENEATH HIM NOW, HER LIPS INVITING.

Her hand reached up to touch his cheek, her eyes filled with longing, and Alex felt himself wrenched asunder. He wanted her and he hated her and he didn't understand his feelings. If he could just rid himself of this obsession. If he could just discover the truth about Quinton's death . . .



Nicole LaBelle

Cordia Byers

FAWCETT GOLD MEDAL • NEW YORK

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*To Michelle and Michael:
You are the joy of my life. I love you.
Mom*



CHAPTER 1

Sentelle's boot struck her in the ribs. "Get up, girl," he said. "It's time to go."

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes, slowly got to her feet, and turned toward the doors.

"Not that way," her father said, impatient and exasperated, and pointed Nicole toward the back of the trading post. A questioning look crossed her face, but Sentelle nudged her back into the room, toward the rear of the building. "Get going," he said, "and behave yourself."

When she didn't move, the trapper let out a sound of disgust, as though she were simply too dense to understand what he had in mind. He pointed her to a corner table, off to the right of the bar, and directed her attention to the man sitting there. "I've made a deal with George Brown, hired you out to him. He needs a housekeeper and I told him what a good cook you was. George's got two young 'uns and no ma for 'em. He needs someone to take care of 'em and to help with the farm. Offered a good price, too."

Sentelle jingled Brown's coins in his pocket. "You be

good and do well by old George and he'll be good to you. Understand me, girl?" Sentelle added, hitting his fist against his palm. Nicole knew well the meaning of the gesture. She'd felt the sting of his hand too many times not to be forewarned.

They'd come from the bayou to the trading post with Sentelle's pelts, Nicole carrying the bundle, the rough cobblestones biting into her bare feet, perspiration filming her upper lip. They had come by flatboat, and Sentelle had left her with the heavy work while he got a start on his drinking. This was the way it had always been. She'd stand near the doors waiting while he swilled corn whiskey or homemade ale and haggled over price, sometimes long into the night.

Nicole was a beautiful girl, a fact Sentelle was not unaware of, and, like most young girls, she yearned for pretty gowns, trimmed in lace, and fancy slippers, like the town ladies wore. But her feet went unshod and her dress was old, the hemline not even reaching mid-calf. The garment was shoddy, but clean—her mother saw to that.

Nicole had grown weary as the hours passed, but she'd sat quietly, fascinated by talk of Harrison and Van Buren and the coming election. The farmers and trappers laughed and joked about Van Buren, calling him a dandy. "If Harrison hadn't introduced the land act of 1800, all of the Northwest Territory would now be owned by speculators. People like us wouldn't have had the chance to buy any of it," Ned Smith said. He wiped the bar in front of the men and set another tankard of ale in the spot where Sentelle's empty one rested. "I guess we'd all have to agree that since the depression of thirty-seven, things have been pretty rough in most places."

Sentelle scratched his beard and nodded his head, as though he were knowledgeable about all that transpired in

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politics. He took a long swallow of ale and, with the back of his sleeve, wiped the foam from his mustache.

Ned was aware of young Nicole and of the way Sentelle treated her. He'd noticed Sentelle's pelts. The man had had a good year, and Smith made mention of it.

"You're right, my friend. These will buy plenty of whiskey to wile away the hot summer days."

"Aye," Smith said, "and something pretty for the girl."

Sentelle had looked back at his daughter and slapped Ned on the back and laughed. "And waste good money that would buy a bottle of the corn? No, my friend, the girl has all she needs. A full stomach and a roof over her head. We ain't like them fancy relatives of hers. We lead a simple life. No slaves to do our bidding. The girl and her mother have all they need."

Ned shrugged his shoulders. He had tried.

Nicole had heard him, too, and had been embarrassed—for herself and for her father. She closed her eyes and tried to shut out the thoughts that flitted about in her mind—even the children taunted her and called her "swamp rat" and "trash." Before long she had fallen asleep.

Nicole, prodded by her father, now walked toward George Brown, then hesitated, looking warily from her father to the man. She knew he'd beat her if she refused him, but she had to try. "Papa, what about Mama? She needs me at home to help her when she's not feeling well. She won't like me taking a job away from home, because I'll miss my lessons."

"I don't give a damn what your high and mighty mother thinks. You'll do as I say, and to hell with her. She ain't ever brought me anything but trouble. Supposed to make me rich when we married, but all she did was get disowned. Another thing, my girl, you can forget about your studies. A girl from the swamps don't need no reading and writing.

All you need is a strong back, a back that will work hard for you during the day and support your man at night." Winking at Brown, Sentelle slapped the skinny man on the shoulders. "Ain't that right, George?"

Running his hand through thinning hair and then across his tobacco-stained beard, George smirked. "You're right on both counts, John. I'll be keeping my eye on the girl to make sure she keeps your word on it." Brown scratched the crotch of his baggy trousers as he stood, and hitched them up. "I reckon it's time for me to be moving on. Them young 'uns of mine don't like to be left alone for too long. Come on, girl, let's go."

"Papa, please let me go home with you," Nicole said. Her voice was soft, and though the words held a plea, there was no trace of self-pity in them. She'd have been long since trampled beneath the feet of John Sentelle had she not developed the ability to withstand the man's insensitivities and selfishness. And she really could not believe that he meant to go through with the deal. It's the whiskey in him, she told herself, and he's making some joke.

However, Sentelle shook his head and shoved Nicole toward Brown. "You're too old to be under your ma's skirts. You can't expect me to keep you for the rest of your life."

Nicole was shocked when she realized that her father did indeed intend to rid himself of her. Her eyes searched the crowd for help. Ned Smith had watched the transaction between the two men, and as Nicole's gaze rested on him he blushed and quickly turned his back. Muttering under his breath, he busied himself cleaning the long oak bar.

George's hand clamped down on the upper portion of Nicole's arm, bruising her flesh as he pulled her from the room. The night air was cool, and Nicole shivered as it

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touched her warm skin. "Come along, girl. We ain't got all night. I want to reach home before the moon sets." George led Nicole to a small wagon harnessed to a broken-down old mare.

Nicole climbed in and noted in the bright moonlight the gleam of George's nearly bald head. The warm Louisiana night was beautiful, with the river flowing silver in the distance and the soft white clouds drifting overhead. But its beauty was lost on Nicole. The flow of tumultuous emotions left no room for anything else. The implications of the conversation between her father and Brown came to her again and again, and mingled with the fear of Brown came a searing hatred for Sentelle. How dared he sell her into a life of servitude to the grotesque man who sat beside her? Maybe she couldn't do anything about it right now, but if she had her way, someday she would destroy John Sentelle, and there would be glory in such revenge.

Brown shook Nicole's shoulder. "Why are you staring at me like that, girl? I ain't done nothing to you."

Nicole shook her head. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean to stare."

George chuckled to himself as he turned in the seat and took the reins. "Thinking, huh? Thinking about the pleasure we're going to have. Well, think long and hard on it, girl, 'cause that's the way it's going to be." Laughing at his obscene little joke, he continued. "Yep, that's the way it is. Long and hard." Rubbing his crotch to eliminate some of the tightness that had begun long before he had approached Sentelle about hiring his daughter, Brown slapped the reins on the mare's back and howled, "Getty-up, you old bag!"

George had spotted Nicole as soon as he entered the trading post. What man in his right mind would not have noticed such a lovely young thing as she rested her face

against the rough wall of the room? She slept peacefully, unaware of how her childlike beauty tempted his lustful nature. She was unkempt. Her dark hair fell in tangles about her delicate features, while her soft pink lips parted slightly as she breathed. They were made for a man's kisses. It had taken all of George's strength to walk past her and go to the bar.

Brown knew Sentelle by reputation. It was said that he was a scoundrel who would stoop to any means to add gold coin to his pocket. As the night passed and he watched Sentelle down the corn whiskey without so much as a glance toward his daughter, George realized that the gossip was right.

It was said that Sentelle had spent all of his life as a trapper in the Louisiana swamps. With flashing black eyes and a rakish smile, in his younger days he'd been a ladies' man, and no young girl had been immune to his charms—not even the beautiful Danielle DuPree, daughter of one of the wealthiest plantation owners in the area. The DuPrees were said to have come from France and to have been distantly related to royalty. Brown couldn't remember all of the talk, but he knew that Sentelle had seduced the young Danielle, and she had gone against her parents' wishes to marry the trapper. The DuPrees were quick to disinherit their daughter and her future offspring, and Sentelle's ardor had quickly waned when he discovered that he would not become rich as a result of his marriage to a DuPree. From that day forward, John Sentelle had done everything in his power to make her life hell. And from what George had heard and seen tonight, he had succeeded. For a fleeting moment George felt a stirring of pity for the girl, but it disappeared as he looked back at her. The sight took his breath.

The moonlight illuminated, yet concealed. It showed the

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flawless beauty of her ivory skin and her huge blue eyes that sparkled like black onyx. Hidden was the threadbare gown and the bruised feet and scratched, slender legs.

George slapped the reins on the old nag's back, trying to make her go faster. He wanted to get home as soon as possible so he might enjoy the tenderness of Nicole's young body. Even now, if the old mare went as fast as her bony legs would travel, it would still be several hours before he reached his small farm. But the whiskey he'd consumed soon made George doze in his seat. The reins went slack, and the horse slowed her pace.

Nicole sat still and silent. She was afraid to move lest she draw George's attention back to her. She had seen the burning look he had given her in the trading post and again as they started their journey. Nicole had seen the same look in Sentelle's eyes when he stared at her mother after time away with his traps. She would be ordered to bed at these times, but the ragged curtain did little to hide Sentelle's actions from her young eyes. Nor did it hinder the sound of Danielle's weeping after Sentelle's snores filled the tiny cabin.

As the horse slowed to a snail's pace, Nicole realized that George had fallen asleep. Seeing her chance to escape, Nicole eased to the rear of the wagon. With each movement she glanced back to make certain that George still slept. As she reached the edge of the wagon, a cloud passed over the moon, obscuring its light. Nicole jumped nimbly from the vehicle and dashed into the underbrush. Crouching low, she crawled beneath the bushes and watched as the wagon passed out of view. Nicole released the breath she had been holding. She was safe. Smiling to herself, she waited until the moon revealed itself again, and stealthily she eased from her hiding place to observe

her surroundings. This was new territory for a girl from the swamps. Nicole realized as she looked about at the forest that thickly covered the area that she did not know in which direction to travel. She knew that she didn't want to take the path the wagon had traveled. Well, she thought, that makes it a little simpler. I'll go in the opposite direction.

The track was little more than an animal trail and was hard to follow, and full of shadows, even with the illumination of the moon. After several false turns that led into the briar patches, Nicole discovered a smooth path and, squaring her shoulders, moved swiftly forward. At sixteen Nicole had no fear of the wilderness. She was at home here, even with the sound of the night birds and the bull alligator as it called to its mate. She'd had few encounters with people, her only companion having been her mother, who'd been friend and mentor and the recipient of all of Nicole's love and devotion.

As her mother's pale image came to mind, Nicole quickened her pace. She was worried. The years of living in the swamps had taken their toll on Danielle's health. Consumption had withered and made old the once beautiful and spirited woman. In Nicole's mind she could see her mother's thin, trembling hand as she pounded the herbs into an elixir to ease her cough. She could also hear Danielle's raspy breath as she gasped for air. Nicole knew that her mother was gravely ill, as John Sentelle also knew.

Nicole made her way west in hope of reaching the river, her thoughts caught by the awful reality of her mother's life. She knew that Sentelle had never cared for her or for Danielle, and she was puzzled about why her mother had married him. Danielle had come from a family of substance, and that, she told her daughter, was the only thing of value she could give to her. She'd made it a point to stress this

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from the time Nicole was old enough to understand. Danielle wanted her to know that she was better than bayou scum, that she could draw on a legacy of pride. Even as she watched Nicole grow into a beautiful young woman, shy of human contact, she wanted her to know of the DuPree blood that flowed in her veins. She wanted her to know that her heritage spanned centuries and was linked to the kings of France.

The sky had begun to lighten as Nicole paused on the bluff overlooking the river. She'd at last reached the great muddy waterway close to home and she sank to the ground, exhausted.

Nicole leaned against the trunk of a huge oak and rubbed her feet gently so as not to reopen and set to bleeding the cuts she'd received along the trail. Now, as she looked out at the swiftly flowing water, shimmering in the morning light despite its mud, she knew that she'd have no problem in finding her way to the shack.

Anxious to get home, she did not rest for long and was soon on the path through the tall cypress trees. She could easily have traveled it in the dark; she knew it that well. For as far back as she could remember, she had tramped here with her mother while Danielle gathered roots and bark for her medicine.

Before long, the shabby little house was in sight. Made of hastily thrown together slabs, it stood precariously on stilts meant to protect it from spring floods. Nicole could see several cracks in the walls of the house, large enough for her to put her arm through. In winter, she and her mother stuffed them with rags to keep out the cold and the wind. The steps that led up to the porch were full of dry rot, as were the beams that supported the sagging roof—the state of the cabin was a clear indication of the contempt with which John Sentelle held his family. He

spent little time there and would not consider renovating it for Danielle and Nicole. He rationalized such action as reparation for the way in which his wife had tricked him.

Nicole never realized the true state of poverty in which she lived, for her the cabin was home, her refuge, and as she made her way toward it a warm feeling crept over her. She skipped a broken step and hurried onto the porch and was soon in her mother's arms, weeping out her story.

Danielle's green eyes were bright with unshed tears. Tiny pucker lines formed about her once shapely lips as she drew them into a straight line and tried to hide the agony Nicole's story caused. She had known for some time that she would have to send her daughter back to her family. She had seen the way John watched Nicole once he'd noticed her young body beginning to mature. The only thing that kept him away from Nicole was their relationship as father and daughter. Danielle knew the reason that John had sent Nicole away. It was to put temptation out of reach. He didn't care if another man bedded her. He held no love for either of them, but incest was another thing, a taboo that even Sentelle would not break.

Danielle loved her daughter and knew that Nicole was too beautiful to be safe at home with her any longer.

Letting her breath go in a ragged sigh, Danielle pushed her daughter away from her and sat down. She rocked slowly back and forth in the old high-backed rocker that had belonged to her own nanny at Live Oak and reflected on the years of abuse she'd endured with John Sentelle. She had tried to leave several times during past years, but each time Sentelle had found her and had beaten her into staying with him. Still, she continued her attempts to be free of him, until he threatened to harm Nicole if she ever tried again. She knew her husband well enough to know

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that he meant every word he said. So she had stayed in the swamps and grew weaker with each succeeding year. Now it was too late for her to leave. Her pride would not let her return to those she loved. No longer the beautiful, spirited woman she'd been when she'd left Live Oak, Danielle shrank from contact with the world she'd known. How could she face them with the slime of the swamp embedded in every part of her?

Stifling a cough, Danielle beckoned her daughter to sit close. "My petite, I have many things I want to explain to you. Come, sit beside me."

Nicole sat down on the floor, her head resting on her mother's knee, the way she'd done since she'd been a small child. Danielle gently brushed Nicole's dark hair away from her face and let her fingers play over the heavy mass of curls. "Nicole, my darling, I have come to a decision. I'm going to send you to my cousin. You will live there with his family and become the lady you were meant to be. It is your right, your heritage as a DuPree. I should have sent you to Quinton when you were a baby. I've been selfish to keep you with me. But Nicole, you have been the only joy in my life."

Nicole's eyes widened in disbelief as her mother spoke. This was not why she'd fled through the night, anxious to reach home. She didn't want to leave her mother. "No, Mama! I won't be sent away. I want to stay with you. What you say is not true, Mama. You are the kindest and most loving person in the world. Please don't send me away."

Tears brimmed in Nicole's eyes and her lips trembled. Her last words tore at Danielle's already weakened heart. She coughed into a rag and saw the bloody phlegm as she removed it from her mouth. The sight renewed her determination. Nicole would go to her cousin Quinton

DuPree. She knew that she would not live much longer. Danielle doubted that she would make it through another cold, damp winter. The years in the bayou had taken her youth and beauty and now would claim her life. She would not allow the same thing to happen to her beautiful child.

Danielle's family had disowned her when she married John Sentelle, and when her father had died without another heir, the estate had gone to a distant cousin, Quinton. It pleased Danielle to know that he had received what she'd been denied. As a young girl she had loved Quinton. He was a good man and she knew that he would be good to Nicole. He would see that she had everything Danielle had been unable to provide for her. Danielle was certain of that. Even after all these years Quinton would help her as he would have done in the past, if only she had asked. But again her pride stood in her way. She could not plead for help when the situation was of her own making. She had disregarded everyone's advice and had paid dearly for it.

Shaking her head, Danielle laid her cool hand against her daughter's cheek. "No, my petite. You will not stay here. It is time for you to see there is another world in which to live. One in which there are pretty clothes and a decent place to lay your head at night. A world where your stomach will not rumble from hunger, or dampness seep into your room to chill your bones. Nicole, it is your right to live in such a world. No matter what has been said or done, you, Nicole Sentelle, belong to that world, not to the swamps."

Nicole placed her own hand over her mother's and looked up into her wan face. "Then if I must go, Mama, you will go with me. I cannot leave you here alone. Who would find herbs to make your medicine on the days you do not feel well? We shall both go or we shall both stay here." Stubbornly, Nicole defied her mother's words.

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Danielle gently shook her head and laid it against the back of the rocker as her eyes roamed the cobwebs that hung from the beams of the ceiling. How was she to make her daughter understand? Nicole was a good child, but was a DuPree and possessed the stubbornness of the DuPrees. There had not been many times in her young life that Nicole had shown this part of her nature. Usually she was shy and said little. But Danielle knew the obstinate nature beneath the demure temperament that her daughter showed to the world. Nicole would not change her mind once she'd set a course. There was only one choice left to Danielle. Warily she rubbed an emaciated hand across her eyes. Her decision made, Danielle felt a sense of relief. She smiled down at her daughter and wondered if Quinton would see the family resemblance. She prayed he would. She bent and kissed Nicole's forehead. "All right, I will go with you. But first I have something to do. You go to bed and rest. You haven't slept in two nights."

Danielle hugged her daughter close. "And remember, Nicole, I love you with all my heart. You have made my life worth living. Never let anyone make you think otherwise. Never be ashamed of your heritage. You were a product of mutual love, proof of that love, and because of it, I have loved you even more."

Nicole gazed into her mother's face, seeing the wrinkles etched deeply across her fine features. She was only thirty-five, but her sickness made her look like a woman of far greater years. Her dark hair was streaked with gray, and dark shadows circled her once vivid green eyes. Her mother's words puzzled Nicole, yet they soothed her troubled mind. At least when they were with their relatives she could have a doctor to care for her. Smiling up at Danielle, Nicole lightly brushed her lips to her mother's fragile cheek.

"Mother, we will both be happy. You will feel much better when you are out of this dampness." Scrambling to her feet, Nicole turned to the curtained area just off the kitchen. It was where she had slept all of her life. As she reached it, she turned once more to Danielle. "Mother, I love you. I'm glad you loved Papa when you married him, no matter how it turned out later. Good night, Mama."

Nicole did not see the shadow that crossed her mother's face as she turned to her bed. Yes, my love, Danielle thought, you were conceived in love. That is the one thing that I have treasured through all these years of misery.

It was late afternoon when Nicole left her mother. The sun had begun to sink behind the cypresses, and the swamp creatures, which had been still in the hot humid day, had come alive. Danielle made her way slowly down the path to her favorite spot, a small, clear pond, its waters always sparkling and cold because of the spring that fed it. Around the pond, in great profusion, grew wildflowers. It was tranquil there and the most beautiful place in the bayou, Danielle had always felt. Unlike her daughter, who loved all of the bayou, Danielle loved only this special place. It reminded her of the small secluded spring on her father's plantation. There she had met her lover, near an arbor of wild grapevines. And there, Nicole had been conceived.

A violent spell of coughing seized Danielle and she doubled over. Gazing into the depths of the water, Danielle saw her reflection. This was not the face of the young girl she remembered, but a face that had withered and been made old by experience. The image of the past faded. Gaining her breath, Danielle stepped into the cold water. She had to do this to free Nicole from the swamps and from John Sentelle—otherwise, Nicole was sure to follow in her footsteps.

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Danielle's last thought as she stepped into the depths of the pond was a prayer that the Lord take care of her daughter. Then Danielle DuPree Sentelle was free of the bayou and the misery she had known in life.



CHAPTER 2

Nicole awoke to the sound of early-morning birds and sun that filtered through the window and onto her bed. She stretched her arms wide, content in the knowledge that today she and her mother would leave this place and everything would be all right.

All was quiet as she climbed from bed and peeked through the ragged curtain. "Mama," she called, but received no answer. A damp chill pervaded the cabin, and Nicole unconsciously rubbed her arms to keep warm, noting the dead embers in the fireplace. It was unusual for Danielle not to have rekindled the fire. And where was she? "Mama?" she called again, a prickling sensation running through her. Something was wrong.

Nicole pulled the ragged brown dress over her head and started toward the door to search for her mother. She stopped when she saw two pieces of paper lying on the table near her plate and cup. One of them was addressed to her, the other to Quinton DuPree. Nicole picked up the one with her name on it. As she unfolded it and began to read, a cry of pain tore from her lips.

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* * *

To my darling Nicole.

As you read this I will be at peace. There is nothing I can say to ease your grief. All I want you to remember is that I love you and I am far better off now than I was before. I have no pain and I do not have to fight for every breath I take. Please go to Quinton, my darling. I know he will love you as I have. I've written him a letter to introduce you. Go now, my darling. Do not stay and search for me. Nothing can harm me now, but you are in danger. May God protect you, my love.

Your mother, Danielle DuPree Sentelle.

Crushing the note to her chest, Nicole gave herself up to the pain and crumpled to the floor. "No, Mama, no!" she sobbed. And even while she knew that it was hopeless, she prayed for Danielle to come back. But her mother was dead. She knew that with a certainty she'd never felt before about anything.

"What's all this bawling about, girl?" Sentelle said as he walked into the cabin. "Get up and get me some breakfast and then we'll find out why you're not with George Brown."

Nicole did not move. She covered her head with her arms and cried even harder as she realized the extent of the agony her mother had suffered. Sentelle kicked her and growled, "Damn it, girl. I said get up." But Nicole ignored him.

His temperament, always foul, was even worse now as he struggled with the after-effects of a long night's drinking. "Danielle, where in the hell are you? Has everyone gone mad around here?" Sentelle shouted, and he ran a hand

through his shaggy hair as though to ease the throbbing of his head.

The mention of her mother's name upon his vile lips roused Nicole from her apathy. She quickly gained her feet and stared with hate-filled eyes at her father. "She's dead. Damn you. She's dead and it's your fault. You killed her as surely as I am speaking: You killed her with your hatefulness and neglect. You killed her," Nicole ranted, until a sharp slap across her cheek brought her out of her hysteria. Her head snapped back and her raven hair swung about her in wild disarray. Her blue eyes sparked fire as she looked at Sentelle.

"What in the hell are you talking about?" he shouted. This was not the meek daughter he had sent off with Brown, but an angry tigress, her eyes aflame.

Nicole threw the crumpled note at his face. "This is what I'm talking about. Mama is dead. She committed suicide." Her eyes were wet again, and Nicole wiped at them viciously as she started past Sentelle. She had to find her mother, had to see her one last time—maybe she'd changed her mind. . . .

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm going to find Mama—alive or dead," Nicole said, and she turned once more to the door.

"To hell you are. You fix my breakfast and I'll go look for her."

Nicole glared back at her father. "To hell if I do. I won't fix your breakfast, nor will I ever fix it again. I don't want you to find Mama. If she's all right, we're leaving this place. We're not taking any more of your abuse!"

"Wait a minute, girl!" Sentelle shouted as Nicole ran from the cabin. "You can't talk to me like that. Come back here!"

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Nicole ignored the command. She hurried down the path toward the one spot where her mother might be. As her feet sped across the dried grass, Nicole sent a silent prayer heavenward. Deep in her heart she knew it was useless. Danielle had suffered too much in her life to want to live longer.

As Nicole approached the glade, she saw Danielle's shawl, hanging on a tree branch beside the pond. Her courage nearly deserted her. She knew that she had to examine the water, but she froze in panic. The last few steps came with agonizing slowness and took every bit of strength she possessed. Nicole was now at the pond's edge, her eyes closed, and she had a feeling of fear so great that it opened a chasm inside her. Summoning as much willpower as she could, she forced herself to look down into the still, clear water. A scream tore from her lips, echoing through the swamps as she gazed at her mother's lifeless body, lying facedown in the pond. Nicole felt as if she herself would die of grief.

The sound of her cry carried to the young man who was walking his horse at a leisurely pace through the swamps. He dropped the reins and ran into the clearing, seeing from a distance the figure of a young girl, her arms wrapped around herself as she swayed back and forth and screamed in anguish. He came closer, to find out if he could help, and was himself shocked by what he saw. Quickly he dove into the water, unaware that it was already too late to help the woman until he touched the cold, clammy skin. She had been dead for some time, and rigor mortis had set in, making it hard to pull the body from the water. The man was breathing heavily when he finally eased the lifeless Danielle onto the soft grass near the pond.

Nicole's screams stopped as she watched the stranger lift her mother's body from the water. Numb with

pain, she collapsed beside her mother. She took Danielle's cold hand in hers and patted it, as though to offer comfort. Her face was wet with tears, but she made no sound. There were no words left to say.

The man watched with sympathy the scene before him. He was uncomfortable and wasn't quite sure what to say. To busy his hands, he wiped the wet hair from his forehead and brushed excess water from his face and, finally, asked what had happened.

"She killed herself." The reply was nearly inaudible, and he had to lean close to hear. The girl did not take her eyes from the woman's face as she spoke.

"Who is she?" the stranger ventured as he knelt beside the girl.

"My mother," Nicole said, and a sob escaped with the words. Putting his arms around the strange young woman, he pulled her against his chest as she wept.

He did not know what to say or do. He smoothed back her dark hair and held her until her sobs began to abate. Easing her out of his arms, the man looked down into her face. He was shocked. Even in her unkempt state this girl was one of the most beautiful creatures he had ever seen. She was young and a bit too thin to be healthy, but that did little to hide her loveliness. "Do you feel like telling me about it now?" he asked, lost in her dark blue eyes.

Nicole looked back at her mother, her voice quavering as she said, "Sh-she killed herself. She was tired and sick and h-her life was miserable." With this, her voice broke again, but she forced herself to continue. "She was a wonderful person, and I loved her very much." Nicole fell silent again as she tried to gain control of herself. "Thank you . . . for all you did," she said finally.

The man squeezed her hand in comfort. "I'll help you get her home. Where do you live?"

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Nicole's eyes moved in the direction of the cabin and she hesitated. She could not take Danielle back to the place where she had suffered so much. No, she would be buried here, near the pond and among the wildflowers she loved.

"I'll bury her here," she told the stranger. "She loved this place. She found comfort here, and this is where she will remain."

"Aren't there any relatives who should be notified? Isn't there anyone else? You can't do it yourself," he said as he looked at the girl.

"No, there isn't anyone. I'm the only one who loved her, and I will take care of her," said Nicole. She stood up and looked about for a proper place in which to dig Danielle's grave. A huge live oak draped in Spanish moss and surrounded by tiny yellow blooms was her choice. She walked to the center of the wildflowers and picked up a crooked branch that had fallen from the tree. Nicole began to clear and dig the soft earth with the crude tool. She did not ask or expect any help from the man, who watched her in amazement.

She must be mad, he thought. If she wasn't mad before now, the shock must have been too much for her. How can she think to do it all herself?

He went to his saddlebag to retrieve the shovel he'd put there only a few hours before, after he and his workmen had ditched a portion of his land to keep it from flooding in the spring rains. The labor had worked up a thirst in him, and he'd been on his way to town to quench it at the tavern when he'd heard the girl's screams. If he hadn't taken the shortcut through the swamps, he would not have been here to help her.

As the first spadeful of earth was removed from the gravesite, Nicole, now calmer, looked at the stranger,

taking in his handsome young face, his dark hair and swarthy complexion. His shoulders, she saw, were muscular and powerful; his still-damp clothes clung to his trim waist and sinewy thighs. Nicole had never seen such a well-proportioned man. For the first time in her life, she was thankful for a masculine presence.

When he finished digging, he lifted Danielle so that Nicole could wrap her shawl about her. She kissed Danielle's cold cheeks before she covered her face with the shawl, and they laid her to rest under the live oak.

Nicole began to fill the grave, but the man stopped her. "I'll do it. Go and sit by the pond until I'm through, and then you can say your final good-bye." Nicole wiped her cheeks with her hands, smudging them with the dirt from her mother's grave. She gave the man a tentative smile. "Thank you. You have been very kind to me."

He was puzzled. Her words were proper, but he felt a sense of surprise in her about what he'd done. He couldn't understand it. Nor could he understand the feeling she elicited in him. Her face was dirty, her eyes red-rimmed and filled with sadness, but when she smiled, her face came alive, enchanting him. Ah, but she is a creature of the wild, he thought, and turned once more to the unpleasant task.

After Nicole had laid another bouquet on the newly turned earth, the man said, "What are your plans now? Do you want me to escort you back home?"

For a moment Nicole did not speak; her own thoughts turned toward the future. She would go to her cousin, as Danielle had wanted. John Sentelle would never do to her what he had done to her mother. After today Nicole planned never to set eyes on him again. She would not go back to the cabin even to collect her few belongings. The only thing she regretted leaving was a small miniature of her

mother when she was a girl. It was better to do without it than to take the chance of having Sentelle force her to stay. She had also left Quinton's note behind, but she would explain the situation to her cousin. She hoped that he would understand.

"No, I won't be returning to my home. I'm going to be living with distant relatives after today. But I do want you to know how much I appreciate everything you have done. I don't really know what I would have done if you had not found me today."

"You would have made it, I have a feeling. . . . Are you sure I can't give you a ride into town?"

"No—and thank you again." Nicole said as she tentatively touched his hand.

The man clasped it briefly and then mounted his black stallion. He tipped his hat and then was gone. Nicole watched him ride out of sight. As he disappeared from view she realized that she had not asked his name, and she had never given him hers. Strangers from beginning to end. He had seen her sadness, comforted her, and helped her. She didn't know his name, but Nicole knew that she would never forget him.



CHAPTER 3

The quarter-mile drive that led to the DuPree manor was lined with live oaks, their graceful limbs draped in Spanish moss. An expanse of land stretched on either side of the drive for as far as Nicole could see, and it included off in one area of the grounds a large number of cabins. Almost a small town, she thought. Nicole would later discover this to be the slave quarters, which held, as well, a large structure that housed the sick and served as a dispensary where rations of salt pork and clothing were distributed. Behind each of the cabins was a small plot of land on which vegetables grew, and she could see chickens bounding about in the yards. Not all of the people in the cabins, Nicole was to learn, actually worked the plantation. Quinton DuPree was loath to sell his slaves once he no longer had use for them, because he knew it would mean separating families. So, instead, for each male who married or jumped the broom, he provided housing and a bit of ground to use for his own purposes.

Nicole was by now tired and hungry and ached from

head to toe. But it all washed away as she approached the end of the long drive. There, before her, was the DuPree home. If she'd been awed by the size of the plantation itself, she was even more awed by the magnificent white two-story mansion. Its stately columns supported a black slate roof, and a wrought-iron balcony wrapped itself around the front of the second floor to wind down the curved staircase to either side of the flagged terrace below. The front veranda was centered by intricately carved double doors, arching above in a fan-shaped stained glass window. Tall shutters accentuated each window, as did boxes of brightly blooming flowers. Jasmine and roses climbed trellises on opposite sides of the veranda and created a bower to the rose gardens.

How could her mother have given up such a place to live in the swamps? Nicole knew that she could never have made that same decision. Live Oak had captured her heart.

Nicole squared her shoulders and made her way up the walk and onto the wide veranda. She reached for the brass knocker and, though she could not have said why, drew back her hand. It wasn't going to be as easy, she thought now, to jump from the solitude and squalor of the swamps into the breathtaking beauty of Live Oak plantation.

From behind a bush she heard a giggle and turned to see a small black boy enjoying her discomfort. Nicole needed no further inducement to face what lay ahead. She'd not shrink from confronting what could only be a far better life than she could have dreamed possible. It was what her mother wanted for her, and it was her right as a DuPree. She raised her chin, straightened her ragged dress, and took the knocker in hand.

The door swung open, to reveal a tall black man dressed in burgundy livery. He was old, and his manner was imperious as he peered down at her, taking in the shabby

dress, the disheveled hair. "Beggars to the rear of the house," he said.

Nicole blushed with embarrassment. She knew how she must appear, but the pride that Danielle had instilled in her came to the fore. She would not allow this man to turn her away. "I'm not here to beg, but to see Monsieur Quinton DuPree. If you would inform him that a distant kinswoman has come to visit, I would appreciate it."

The butler glanced uncertainly at Nicole, his dark eyes doubting the sincerity of her words. He shut the door in her face. For a moment despair rushed through Nicole, but her anger quickly replaced it. She was Danielle DuPree's daughter, and she would not be so rudely dismissed. She reached for the knocker once again, only to have the door come open and reveal another man. Briefly he stared at her, then his handsome face lit with happiness. He wrapped his strong arms about her tiny waist and swung her off her feet as he murmured, "Danielle, oh, my Danielle, it's been so long."

Nicole was taken totally by surprise at the stranger's exuberance. Finally she managed, "I'm not Danielle. I'm Nicole, Danielle's daughter."

The man abruptly ceased his joyful embrace and stared down into Nicole's face. He cupped her small chin with lean fingers and looked at the dark hair, the large blue eyes. He studied the face closely and touched her hair, taking in her ragged appearance. "Forgive me, but you are so like your mother. Please come in and tell me how she is and why it has taken you so long to visit." He placed a strong arm about Nicole's shoulders and led her into the house.

"Why didn't Danielle come with you?" he queried as he seated Nicole on a silk-covered settee, unmindful of the

glaring disparity between the barefoot girl and the sumptuous luxury of his home. His questions flowed eagerly, until he saw tears well in Nicole's eyes. "My petite, what is wrong?"

"Mama is dead," Nicole replied simply.

At her words a look of anguish crossed Quinton's face, and the blood slowly receded from his face. He shut his eyes tightly and for a moment did not speak. "How?" he asked at last, the question nearly inaudible, and Nicole could see the pain in him. He cared deeply for her mother, she realized. And when she told him that Danielle had drowned herself he stared down at her in shock, then abruptly sank into a nearby chair, his eyes full of tears. "Did you know we were very close when we were young?"

Quinton extended his hand to Nicole. He needed at that moment to touch someone who had also loved Danielle. Nicole accepted it gratefully. She sensed that his need matched her own. "Yes. She spoke of you often through the years. She was glad you were the one who inherited Live Oak when her father took it from her. She thought a great deal of you."

Quinton smiled at her statement. It was ironic to hear all that he and Danielle had shared put into so few words. His hand tightened on Nicole's. She was the image of her mother. The only difference lay in her eyes. Danielle's had been a vivid green, where Nicole's were deep, dark blue—like his, when he'd been her age. But then she was a DuPree, and it was also possible that she'd inherited her father's coloring. He could see from Nicole's clothes that they'd been poor, but Danielle would not have taken her life because of that. He wanted to know it all.

"Come and sit by me," Quinton said, patting the seat beside him. "I want you to tell me how all this has

happened. It is hard for me to understand. Danielle loved life so much when I knew her."

Quinton was silent throughout Nicole's story, but as she finished there were fresh tears in his eyes. He leaned his head against the chair, silent now as he slowly let it all sink in. The only sound in the room was the ticking of the china clock above the mantel.

During this time, Nicole studied Quinton DuPree. He was a handsome man. And at thirty-six, his face bore few signs of aging. The light streaks of gray in his dark hair were the only indication. His tanned skin still held the resilience of youth, while small lines creased the side of his full lips, as though he smiled a great deal. A rather attractive dimple drew attention to his firm square chin, and Nicole realized that he was the second handsomest man she had ever seen. The stranger who'd helped bury her mother still held sway in her mind.

After a few moments, Quinton turned to Nicole and smiled. "I'm so glad you came. This house has been lonely for too long. It will be good to have a young person around again."

Nicole's eyes brightened with happiness. He wanted her to stay. "Are you sure your wife will not mind my coming so abruptly?" she questioned and watched as a frown creased Quinton's brow. "No, there is nothing to worry about. You see, Cecila, my wife, died five years ago. She was a good wife and died trying to give life to our child. I lost both of them. Now I live alone. You're a very welcome addition to the household. It gets lonely here with no one to talk with but the servants." Quinton laughed and patted Nicole's hand. "You see, you win all arguments with them, and that's not much fun."

Nicole laughed with Quinton. They would be of comfort to one another. She would help ease his loneliness, and he

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would help her with her grief. "You're right. It's not fun to win all the arguments, but it is fun trying." With that they both laughed until tears brimmed in their eyes. He clasped her hand and squeezed it affectionately. Nicole returned the pressure, a gesture that marked an end to their separate loneliness.



CHAPTER 4

Quinton lavished her with every luxury, and Nicole adjusted with uncommon ease to her new life. The day after her arrival at Live Oak he sent to New Orleans for one of the finest seamstresses to fit Nicole with a complete wardrobe—from the top of her dark raven head to her tiny feet. He insisted that she have anything her heart desired and ordered soft muslin morning gowns, silk and satin evening gowns, several riding habits in various shades of blue to match her eyes, as well as frilly silk undergarments. He also ordered slippers made of soft kid and silk to accompany the gowns. Nicole felt like a princess with all the attention Quinton showered upon her.

For the first time in her life she was completely comfortable. Her stomach experienced no hunger pangs, nor was she overly hot or cold. It would have been hard for anyone looking at this elegant young woman to imagine that only a short while before she'd been trudging through streets with children taunting her cruelly, or grown-

ups feeling sorry for her. She was like the caterpillar emerging from cocoon to beautiful butterfly.

Quinton watched Nicole's progress with the keen eye of a man falling in love. He knew, for the first time since Danielle, the happiness that comes only with love. He had cared for Cecila, but he'd not loved her. His marriage had been for convenience. Cecila had possessed a large dowery, and for a man without the prospect of an inheritance, he needed what she had to give. Cecila had known this and it had hurt her at times, but she loved Quinton. She knew that he longed for children more than anything else on earth, and in that she felt she had failed him. Each time she conceived a child, it ended in a miscarriage. The doctor had warned her that another attempt to have a child could cost her her life, but Cecila did not heed his advice. She loved Quinton, and in trying to give him what he most desired she had lost her own life.

As months passed swiftly, Quinton found himself once again in love as he had been eighteen years before. He watched as the shy backwoods child slipped away and was replaced by an elegant young woman. As the months passed Nicole's body matured. The sharp, angular lines of childhood slipped away and were replaced by the soft round curves of a woman. She refined the grace and manners that Danielle had tried so hard to teach her and in essence, became a lady.

Nicole was happy. It showed in her sparkling eyes and the squeals of delight when Quinton gave her a new bauble. There were times when Quinton saw a flash of her earlier sorrow. She would withdraw from him, to become silent and pensive. He understood her moods and left her in peace. He had experienced those emotions himself in the past. Only with Nicole's coming had they passed.

Nicole found herself in one of her moods several days

after her eighteenth birthday. It was becoming increasingly hard to remember that she had not been at Live Oak all of her life. She had everything any young girl could want. Or did she? When she was with Quinton she could not imagine ever being happier, yet when she sat alone in her spacious bedroom, niggling doubt crept into her mind. She sat for hours staring at her reflection in the intricately carved mirror. She tried to examine her feelings. She knew that something was missing but could not understand what it could be. Finally she gave up that effort and went to find Quinton. His warm smile always lightened her dreary moods. Nicole had not expected to find the answer a month after her birthday. And it lay in a direction she had never guessed.

The warm April day was one of the most perfect Nicole could ever remember. The sun was bright and the birds sang happily as Quinton and Nicole took their morning ride. Daffodils bloomed in profusion all through the meadows and honeysuckle scented the air. Nicole rode her birthday present from Quinton. She was a honey-colored filly, and Nicole chose the obvious name for her.

Nicole always enjoyed her rides about the plantation with Quinton. He talked constantly about the running of Live Oak, proud of his land and wanting to instill in Nicole the love he felt for it. On this morning, however, Quinton rode in silence. Nicole sensed his turmoil but was unsure about how to deal with it. She kept her peace, allowing Quinton to lead the way. When he was ready, he'd tell her.

At the edge of the meadow, Quinton reined in his mount and turned to Nicole. For a moment his eyes searched her face and then, as if having made a decision, he dismounted and held up his arms for Nicole. She slid from the saddle

into his waiting arms. "I want to show you something," Quinton said as he led her along a path beneath the vines. As they entered the arbor, Nicole gazed upon a small, secluded world. There were no sounds amid the thick foliage, except from a clear, bubbling spring in the center of the glade. Soft clumps of grass grew lush and green, and wildflowers peaked delicate blossoms toward hazy shafts of sunlight. Here, the outside world did not exist, and only she and Quinton belonged.

Nicole saw in Quinton's eyes the joy he took in sharing this special place with her. He smiled and held out his arms, and without a moment's hesitation, Nicole stepped within his embrace. Though briefly unsettled by the feel of his lean, hard body against hers, Nicole was quickly aware of how secure she felt within the circle of his arms. His eyes radiated such tenderness that she was filled with warmth and love, eager to share not just the beauty around them but that which she instinctively felt they shared within themselves. Her lips parted and Quinton captured them with his own. Nicole's arms crept about him as she pressed her body closer to his. She felt his desire, but he went no further. Then, finally, he abruptly released her. Quinton turned away, ashamed for allowing his emotions to get out of control.

"Quinton, what is it? Did I do something wrong?" Nicole asked, bewildered by the sudden change in him.

He shook his head. "No, my petite. I was the one who did something wrong."

Nicole closed the space between them and placed her hand on his arm. "What did you do? You only kissed me. Why is that wrong, when I wanted you to do just that?"

Quinton let his gaze travel over her hair and her eyes, her soft pink lips. "Do you mean that, Nicole? Or am I

just an old man trying to recapture his youth in a beautiful young woman?"

The gentle sound of Nicole's laughter filled the peaceful arbor. She threw her arms about him and said softly, "Quinton, do you want to go through your youth again, or do you want to have a relationship between a man and a woman?"

A tremor of excitement ran through Quinton. His dreams of happiness were finally to come true. He hugged Nicole close and then swung her up into his arms. "Oh, my love, you are wonderful." But as he looked into the fresh young face, a somber thought crossed his mind. "But I'm twenty years your senior. I'm far too old for you. Do you know I'm old enough to be your father?"

Nicole giggled and playfully tapped his chin. "Silly, age doesn't matter. And thank goodness you're not my father. What I feel for you is not what a daughter should feel."

Quinton pressed his lips against her slender throat as he lowered her to the soft grass and murmured, "Nor are my thoughts fatherly."

Cavorting like children, Quinton and Nicole teased each other and rolled in the tall grass. Each caress brought Quinton into great conflict with his passion. He wanted Nicole, but he did not want to lose her as he'd lost Danielle. Before he bedded Nicole, she would become Mrs. Quinton DuPree.

Their playfulness gone, Quinton and Nicole lay side by side, serious thoughts replacing earlier ones. Quinton tentatively stroked the curve of Nicole's face and throat, the outline of her full lips. His voice was husky with emotion. "Nicole, I love you and want you as my wife. Will you marry me, even though I am an old man?"

Nicole's throat tightened with emotion as she saw the

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love and anxiety in his proud, handsome face. Slowly she reached up to caress his beloved countenance, tears of happiness cascading down her cheeks. Of course she would marry him. She loved him as he loved her.



CHAPTER 5

Nicole stood patiently in the warm rays of the morning sun as Madame Jarden saw to the final fitting of her wedding gown. Time had passed swiftly from the day in the grape arbor when Quinton had proposed. Nicole's hours these past months had been spent in preparation for the coming nuptials. Tonight, on the eve of their wedding, there was to be a celebration supper, to which Quinton had invited several of the neighboring plantation owners and their wives. Emily, Quinton's sister-in-law, who lived at Kensington, the adjoining plantation, was also to come.

Nicole could not keep her eyes from straying to the full-length mirror, where she viewed her reflection in the beautiful gown that had been designed for her. Fashioned from imported French lace over shimmering satin and intricately woven tiny seed pearls, its neckline was cut daringly low. The lace, however, rendered a virginal appearance as it both concealed and revealed the softness of her skin. The fitted sleeves were edged with pearls, as was the scalloped neckline. The veil fell softly over her face and

hair, its crown a circlet of pearls from which the lace trailed gracefully to the floor. At her throat, a choker of pearls given to her by Quinton as a wedding gift glistened against her ivory throat.

Nicole touched the gown lightly and released a soft sigh of wonder. It was all so perfect that it didn't seem real. Had it really been only two years since she had come to live at Live Oak in a ragged brown dress?

A knock sounded and Quinton walked in without waiting for a reply. The seamstress gasped and scolded, "Monsieur, you must not be here. It is bad luck to view the bride in her wedding gown before the ceremony. You must leave!"

Quinton's eyes brightened at the sight of Nicole. She was a vision of beauty and innocence. He smiled at the seamstress. "No, madame. This is a sight I would not miss for anything. Nothing is going to spoil our wedding, so set your mind at rest. What you say is no more than superstition."

Madame Jarden swelled with indignation. Her small mouth turned down at the corners as she frowned. Her double chin jutted forward. "I beg to differ with you, monsieur. It is more than superstition. In my years I have seen many things. You must leave now, before any more damage is done."

At that point Nicole could contain herself no longer. A giggle escaped her that sent Madame Jarden to the breaking point. She abruptly gathered her bag and straightened her back as she walked toward the door. She glanced back as her hand reached for the doorknob, and rebuked them, as though they were two wayward children. "So be it. The gown is finished. There is nothing else for me to do here. You will not heed my warning, so let it be on your heads, the misfortune which befalls."

As the door closed behind the plump little lady, Quinton and Nicole burst into laughter. Tears of mirth filled their eyes. "Quinton, you should not tease Madame Jarden. I'll be lucky if she ever consents to work for me again."

Quinton's eyes glittered mischievously. "Ah, my love, she will get over it after our wedding takes place and she sees no harm has come from my enjoying your beauty."

A blush of pleasure brightened Nicole's cheeks as she slowly turned to let Quinton view her gown. "Isn't it beautiful? Madame Jarden outdid herself this time." The love she felt for Quinton was abundantly clear in her sparkling eyes and face. "Quinton, I am so happy. You will never know what you have done for me. I love you so much."

Quinton needed no other words of encouragement as he narrowed the space between them and enfolded Nicole within his strong arms. No words were spoken between the two lovers as he lightly caressed her dark hair and pressed her close to his lean body. Ah, so like your mother, he thought. So beautiful and innocent.

At times it was hard for Quinton to distinguish between the two. Danielle and Nicole were so much alike. He had caught himself several times before he had called Nicole by her mother's name. As the days passed and the wedding date neared, it seemed to Quinton that Nicole became more and more like his beloved Danielle.

His conscious mind never suspected it but at moments like this, with her young body pressed against his, she did become Danielle. It was as though his youth had been restored, and his love for Danielle along with it.

Quinton kissed Nicole on the forehead before he held her at arm's length and gazed down at her. But what he saw was not Nicole. Her image had been replaced by Danielle's. "I love you so much. If anything should ever

happen to ruin our wedding, I don't believe I would want to live any longer. Since your return . . .” Quinton stumbled over his words as Danielle's image faded, and he tried to correct his error. “I mean, your coming has made my life whole again. I didn't realize how lonely I had been until you came into my life.”

A shadow seemed to pass over the sun, dimming the brightness of the room as Quinton spoke, A tiny shiver of apprehension crept up Nicole's spine. “Don't say such things. Nothing is going to spoil our plans. What would I do without you? I would have no one. Quinton,” Nicole said as she threw her arms about him and held him close. “I love you so much.”

Quinton kissed Nicole and then held her away from him. He had come to a decision and wanted her to know his intentions. He seated her on the silk upholstered sofa and sat beside her. Taking her hand into his, he said, “Nicole, I had not intended to tell you this until after our wedding, but I think now is the time. It will put your mind to rest so you may enjoy the coming events better. You are not to worry about your future. I know there are a great number of years that separate us, and none of us knows the future. I have taken such things as the possibility of my sudden demise into consideration. I saw my lawyers the other day and have made my will. In it you are the sole beneficiary of Live Oak and all that goes with it.”

Nicole was stunned by Quinton's revelation. Her eyes widened with dismay and she grasped his arm. “No, Quinton. I'm not marrying you to regain my mother's inheritance. I love you.” Nicole's voice trembled as she spoke, and Quinton quickly hugged her close for reassurance. “I know, my petite. I only wanted you to be protected if something were to happen. I'm not planning to meet my maker anytime soon. I enjoy holding you too much. But

Nicole, we never know what the future holds, so it is best to be prepared," Quinton soothed as he brushed a stray hair from her forehead. "Don't fret, my darling. I plan to share many years with you and our children. You may never inherit Live Oak. Our son may be the one to do so."

With the image of their children in her mind, Nicole smiled. Next to Quinton, she wanted children more than anything else on earth. Nicole had so much love to give that she wanted to share it with a houseful of offspring. "Enough of this talk. I don't want to hear of wills and death. Soon it will be my wedding day, and that is all I want to think about."

As the depressing thoughts evaporated and were replaced by thoughts of the next day, Nicole's happiness returned. Arching a mischievous brow, she said, "I don't know if I want Madame Jarden as my seamstress anymore. She certainly knows how to ruin a bright morning with her gloomy predictions."

Quinton laughed and hugged Nicole to him. He pulled her to her feet and swung her around happily. "Nothing is going to ruin our wedding."

Quinton's playfulness was abruptly halted as Jordan, the butler, entered the room. He had caught the master and mistress unawares, and he smiled to see their happy faces. Nicole blushed with embarrassment as Quinton lowered her to the floor and she tried to straighten her gown. "Sir, you have a visitor in the drawing room. It's Master Alex."

"Alex!" Quinton said as he hurried to the door. "Hurry and change, my love. This is one person you have to meet. My God, it's been two years since I've seen the young rascal." Nicole wondered about their guest. She had never seen Quinton so eager to see anyone before. "Who's Alex?" she queried.

"He's Cecila's nephew. He's been like a son to me.

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Now hurry, darling. I want my two favorite people to meet," Quinton said as he left the room.

Nicole pouted and crossed her arms over her chest as jealousy swept over her. She had not known there was anyone else in the world whom Quinton loved beyond her. He had never mentioned any relatives, with the exception of Emily. There were many aspects to Quinton DuPree that Nicole did not know, she realized suddenly.

As she put away her wedding gown and slipped into a soft baby-blue muslin morning gown, Nicole felt her culpability. She reproached herself for her jealousy. It was childish for her to feel angry because Quinton loved other people. He loved her as a woman and wanted her for his wife, and that was what mattered. Wasn't there enough love in her to encompass others? It all felt so new to her. Before, she had only one person to love, her mother. But the circle would widen now that she was to marry. There would be children and, perhaps, other family members to engage her loyalty and love. Quinton had given her his heart, and she should be honored that it was rich enough to enfold more than one person: She would do well to follow his example.

The drawing room door burst open as Quinton rushed in. "Damn me, Alex! What took you two years to come home?" He hugged the younger man and then shook his hand. "You young rascal! You could have at least dropped me a line every now and then. The only way I heard anything about you was when I visited Kensington and spoke with your mother. How have you been? You do look fit."

Holding up both hands as if to ward off an assault, Alex Chandler laughed. "Whoa there, uncle. One question at a time. I came to give my congratulations, and not to be interrogated."

"Well, then, give me your congratulations and then answer my questions, you impudent pup." Quinton laughed as he settled himself into his favorite chair and waited for the young man's answer.

Alex casually seated himself opposite Quinton. He leaned back in the chair and his eyes surveyed the room. "It's nice to be back. Has it been only two years? It's felt like twenty. I only arrived at Kensington three days ago and heard your good news. Congratulations, uncle. It's about time you found yourself a woman and quit living here like a saint. I don't see how you did it for so long. Had it been me, there would have been many little cream-colored babies running around down in the quarters."

Quinton laughed at the jest. Alex never lacked for feminine companionship. With his lean, dark good looks, he drew the opposite sex like bees to honey. Every unmarried female in the parish longed to capture the elusive Alex Chandler. It was rumored that several of the married ladies also carried a flame for the young man. But to Quinton's knowledge, Alex had never been serious about any of them. He had never felt that deep searing emotion called love.

Both men were laughing in happy camaraderie when Nicole entered the room. She smiled with pleasure to hear Quinton's happiness, but her smile vanished as the memories she had shut away for the past two years came flooding back when she saw their visitor.

It was the man who'd helped bury her mother. She closed her eyes to try and erase the day once more from her mind. She swayed slightly, and Quinton saw her distress. He was quickly by her side and asked anxiously as he led her to the sofa, "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she lied weakly, "I'm just a little breathless from running down the stairs."

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Quinton's eyes mirrored his concern as he briefly studied Nicole's pale face. He smiled as he said, "Nicole, this is Alexander Chandler, from Kensington plantation. He is Cecila's nephew, her older sister's son."

Nicole smiled at their visitor as she remembered his kindness on that far-off day and extended her hand in greeting. "I'm glad to meet you, sir." She wanted to thank him again for his help, but as he smiled at her and took her hand within his own she saw no recognition in his dark eyes. Briefly she was piqued because he did not remember her, or the tragedy that had caused her so much pain. Then a feeling of relief swept over her. It was best to put the past completely away.

"The pleasure is all mine, madame, I can assure you," Alex said as he looked over Nicole's shoulder at Quinton. "Uncle, I see congratulations are in order once more. I never dreamed you would have captured such a beauty. There must be something to old age after all."

Nicole felt the hand that Quinton rested on her shoulder tense at Alex's words. Yet he laughed with the younger man as if he were not sensitive about his age. Her heart went out to him. She touched his hand lightly to show her love. The look she received from Quinton rewarded her gesture.

Alex had watched the exchange between the two and smiled to himself. For once he believed that the ladies of the district might be right in their gossip. They had assumed in their own smug fashion that Nicole was more than a guest to Quinton DuPree. From the look that Alex had just observed, he would agree with them. It was far from that of an innocent courtship.

"You will be here for the wedding tomorrow, Alex?" Quinton asked.

"Uncle, you know I wouldn't miss it for the world,"

Alex said as he watched Quinton's fingers entwine unconsciously within Nicole's thick locks.

"I'm glad to hear it. I was hoping you would return and honor me by being my best man." Quinton smiled down at his nephew. The look in his eyes showed the bond that had grown between them through the years. He loved this young man like his own son.

Alex's smile returned his affection. "Sir, it is I who am honored. Now it's all settled about the wedding, what are your plans for the honeymoon?"

Quinton seated himself next to Nicole and took her hand. "After the ceremony we will travel to New Orleans for a few days, and then take ship to Europe. Nicole and I have distant relatives there whom we plan to visit."

"Well, uncle, I wish you and your lady all the happiness in the world. I know you deserve it."

"Thank you, Alex. Nicole and I both appreciate your sentiments. I only wish your mother felt the same way."

Nicole's eyes widened in surprise. She had heard nothing of Emily's displeasure. She had met the lady only once, yet during that time Emily had been courteous if not friendly. Nicole had thought little of the incident. She had assumed that most people were a little distant upon their first meeting a total stranger.

The thought had never occurred to her to suspect Emily of disliking the idea of her marriage to Quinton. In her naivete Nicole did not know that she flouted convention by living at Live Oak without being properly chaperoned. Quinton had been all too aware of the breach, but he so enjoyed their solitude that he'd been loath to change it. He realized that this was why the planters left their wives at home when they came to visit, and he suspected what the gossip must be. But now that they were to be married, he thought, the talk would settle down.

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As though to confirm this, Alex said, "Don't worry, uncle. I think Mama will come around after the wedding. You know she only wants your happiness."

Jordan entered the room, bearing a tray of iced drinks. As they were served, Alex took the time to study the young woman who was to become his uncle's wife.

This was the main reason for his visit. He had heard all the gossip from his mother and was determined to find out what was happening at Live Oak. He loved Quinton DuPree as though he were his own father. He didn't want Quinton or his reputation hurt by some little trollop moving in and taking him for everything he was worth.

The first news Alex received when he returned home was that Quinton had changed his will. Previously he had been the benefactor, but only a few days before his arrival at Kensington, Quinton had visited and explained that he'd made the change in favor of his new wife. No one had ever heard of her before she had taken up residence at Live Oak. Quinton had told Emily that she was Danielle DuPree's daughter. There was no proof of such a fact. Even if there were, she was nothing but swamp trash. Danielle had disgraced her family by running off with a trapper.

These thoughts ran through Alex's mind as he watched his uncle fawn over the young woman, touching her hand lightly as he handed her a cool drink or briefly patting her bare shoulder as he settled back beside her like a huge contented cat.

Judging from Nicole's grace and charm, Alex would never have imagined that she had come from the bayous. The only women he had ever seen in the swamps looked exactly as if they belonged there.

Alex's expression was thoughtful as his eyes searched the beautiful face. As she smiled up at his uncle, he sensed that he had seen her somewhere before. Could it have been

in New Orleans in some brothel? Maybe? Many a sly woman resided in the whorehouses of New Orleans. He'd had proof of that himself. He had lost his wallet to one only a short time ago. She had lifted it and was gone before anyone in the house knew of it. That lady had probably set up her own house by now at his expense.

As he studied them, Alex had time to contemplate the threat to his future. He did not care that much for the land in itself, but he refused to be put aside by some waterfront doxy. There had to be a way to stop it before it was too late. "Uncle," he asked suddenly, "may I ask how you two became acquainted?"

Quinton shook his head and laughed. "Now, Alex, don't you think it's time for me to receive some answers instead of *you* interrogating *me*? You never did explain your long absence. Where in the hell were you?"

This quick change of subject only heightened Alex's determination, but he decided that it would be best for now to let it rest and answer Quinton. "It's a long story," he said. He'd traveled all over Europe the past two years and knew that the only place he wanted to be was there in Louisiana. "I have several business ventures going. One dealing in cattle out of Texas and the other is shipping prime furs from up north back to Europe. I have also begun my own shipping firm in New Orleans, and that's the main reason for the long absence. I had to travel to the Continent to buy several ships and to find the captains to man them. The two years have paid off, however. The shipping line is beginning to show a profit."

Quinton's face glowed with pride. "I always knew you had a head on your shoulders. I feel much better knowing you're succeeding on your own. Your mother, I assume, has told you of my will?"

Alex nodded as his gaze fell upon Nicole. She knew in

an instant that he resented the fact. Nicole was stung by the look. In it she saw violence and hatred. As suddenly as it had come, it was gone and Alex's smile was warm and friendly. "Live Oak is yours, uncle, to do with as you see fit. I've no need of the inheritance, even were my business ventures not to pay off. Kensington is a very profitable plantation, and it would provide generously for me for the rest of my life."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Alex. I love you, but I also love Nicole and have to think of her future. Should anything happen to me, it would be all she had. Alex, I hope the day never comes, but if it should, I would ask a favor of you."

"Anything, uncle."

"Would you look after Nicole and advise her on business matters?"

Alex gritted his teeth but said, "Of course, sir."

Nicole spilled her drink down the front of her gown as she abruptly stood and faced the two men. Tears brimmed in her eyes. She had listened to such talk all morning, and it was playing havoc with her nerves. "No more, do you hear? I will not listen to another word. Tomorrow is our wedding day, and I will hear no more about death." With a stifled sob, Nicole fled the room.

Alex and Quinton were dumbfounded by her outburst and stared at her retreating figure. As they glanced uncertainly at one another, Quinton broke the silence. "Pre-wedding jitters, I guess."

As he rose to follow Nicole, Quinton glanced once more at his nephew. "It's good to have you back, Alex. Will you come with your mother tonight for dinner?"

"I'm sorry, uncle," Alex said as he also rose from his chair, "I have a previous engagement, but if it's not too late when I return, I will stop by for a nightcap."

"Then if I don't see you tonight, I will see you bright and early tomorrow for the wedding," Quinton said as he slapped his nephew on the back with affection.

"I'll be here," Alex said as he took his leave.

After seeing Alex to the door, Quinton quickly climbed the stairs and soon found Nicole upon her bed, weeping. Gently he took her into his arms and tried to soothe her. "Nothing is going to stop our wedding. I love you, my petite, with all my heart."

Nicole threw her arms about Quinton's neck and kissed him passionately. The intensity of the kiss surprised them both. He returned her kiss as he laid her gently on the bed. The passion that he had contained all these months erupted. His fingers sought out the tiny pearl buttons on the bodice of Nicole's gown and began to undo them. His lips traveled from her earlobe slowly down her slender neck to her alabaster shoulder, seeking the ripe young flesh of her breast that appeared above the neckline of her gown. His anxious fingers eagerly tried to free them from their confines, but before he reached his goal a gasp from the doorway startled them apart.

Nicole's maid, Betsy, stood, wide-eyed, in the doorway as she opened and closed her mouth nervously and tried to apologize. The lace wedding veil in her hand trembled. Nicole saw the girl's fright and quickly sent her on her way.

By the time Betsy was gone, Quinton's sanity had returned. He removed himself from the bed and turned his back on Nicole while she straightened her gown. Nicole crossed to him and placed her arms about him as she leaned her face against his back. "Quinton, I love you," she whispered. "Tomorrow we will be husband and wife, but it does seem a long time away." Nicole felt Quinton's

muscles tense beneath her arms as she offered herself to him.

A tremor shook his strong body as he turned and hugged her close. "No, my darling. I will not take you to my bed before you are my wife. I love you too much for it to be otherwise. You are young and innocent. I know you offer all you possess for the love you feel, but I can't take it yet."

Gently he pulled from her embrace and said, "Now, my petite, it's time for you to rest. Have you forgotten we have guests coming tonight? It wouldn't do for them to see red and swollen eyes just before our wedding, now, would it?"

Nicole placed both her hands on Quinton's shoulders and tiptoed to kiss his cheeks. "Until tomorrow night, my love."

Quinton laughed and playfully slapped Nicole on the rear. "No more of that. To bed, my petite—and alone. Even though it tears me apart." With that he kissed her on the forehead and left Nicole to rest.



CHAPTER 6

Nicole wearily made her way up the stairs to her room. She closed the door and leaned against it, a thankful sigh of relief running through her. The evening had been tedious. Quinton had seemed well pleased, but Nicole had been all too aware of the near tangible animosity directed toward her by the ladies who'd come to supper. Not that they had appeared anything but cordial and friendly during the meal. It was afterward, when the men were having their wine and tobacco and the women had retired to the drawing room, that the ladies made it pointedly clear that Nicole would not be accepted into their society. No sooner had the doors to the room slid closed than the planters' wives gathered about Emily and began to chat among themselves about their families and all manner of local events.

At first she'd tried to inject a comment now and then. But they fell upon the ladies' ears as though never spoken. Still, Nicole was determined that none of them would know how hurt she was by their actions. She seated herself

and picked up a piece of lacework she'd been embroidering for her wedding and began to sew.

She looked at her reflection in the full-length mirror, and did not see the girl from the swamps. The gold satin gown that she wore was as elegant as any of theirs. Her manners and speech had been impeccable. But they had not seen her as a gracious hostess and the future mistress of Live Oak. Rather, she was viewed as an upstart trying to force her way into their world, a world they had no wish to contaminate with bayou trash.

Nicole seated herself at the dressing table and unpinned the mass of raven hair. She massaged her temples to ease the tension that had been building throughout the evening. As she reflected on the events of the day, she realized that had it been a day earlier, she would not have sensed the hostility. The conversation between Quinton and his nephew had removed the veil from her naive eyes. Nicole knew now that she had been misguided about her ideas of Quinton's world. In all, it was the same as the one she had lived in before. Cruelty and prejudice were not the reserved sins of the poor.

Nicole's cheeks burned with humiliation as she removed her gown and slipped on the pale pink silk nightdress. If it had not been for the love and pride she had seen burning so brightly in Quinton's eyes all evening, Nicole would not have been able to endure the seemingly endless hours until the last of the guests had said their good-nights.

Climbing between the silken sheets of the cherrywood tester bed, Nicole knew that she could never let Quinton know of her feelings. She loved him too much to let anything cast a shadow on their wedding. And, too, she felt sure that he would not understand what had happened. He was too kind and gentle a man to discern the snobbery

of the women. It would hurt him deeply even to suspect their feelings toward his future wife.

Fluffing her pillow, Nicole blew out the candle and snuggled down in the soft bed. Tomorrow she would be Quinton's bride, and nothing else mattered. She drifted off to sleep with Quinton's happy face in her mind.

It had been an hour since the last of his guests had gone. Quinton poured himself a snifter of brandy and settled comfortably in the leather wing-backed chair. Stretching his long legs, he swirled the amber liquid in the glass as he went over the events of the evening. All had gone well. Nicole had been the perfect hostess, and Emily and the other ladies had seemed to accept her. He had feared just the opposite. Quinton knew the women he had invited to dinner that evening. They were prudish, to say the least. Smiling to himself, he leaned his dark head against the chair as he envisioned tomorrow's ceremony. It would be the happiest day of his life. After all these years, he had finally found a woman that he could love as much as Danielle.

Quinton's smile faded from his lips as his thoughts returned to his beautiful cousin. They had been so much in love. Both had given freely to each other, even though there was no chance that their love could ever be fulfilled. Cecila was always in the background, shadowing any happiness that the two lovers found in each other's arms.

Quinton tried once more to find the reason for Danielle's behavior. She had confessed her love for him and then suddenly run away with the trapper, John Sentelle. For the hundredth time, Quinton tried to unravel the puzzle. He knew that there had to be an answer for Danielle's abrupt actions, but during all the years since that tragic event took place, Quinton had been unable to find it.

A light tap at the French door leading to the gardens brought Quinton out of his morbid reverie. Alex, he thought as he rose from his chair and went to the door, you've decided to stop by after all.

Quinton swung the door wide. The light did not filter into the garden, and the darkness shielded his visitor from his view. "Alex, I'm glad you could make it."

A buckskin-clad figure stepped from the shadows, and for a moment Quinton did not recognize the man. The shaggy beard obscured most of his features, but as their eyes met, dark blue against black, Quinton knew the man instantly.

"Sentelle!" he said, too shocked even to move while the man brushed past him, to walk casually into the room. Sentelle poured himself a drink and quickly downed it.

"So you remember me, do you?" Sentelle grinned. "Figured you would have forgotten after all this time."

Quinton stood, immobilized, unable to sort out the meaning of Sentelle's presence, yet certain there would be some consequence from the visit.

"What do you want?" he said, at last finding words.

"Got some things to talk to you about, DuPree." Sentelle had refilled his glass, and Quinton now clutched his own as he would have liked to clutch the man's throat.

"We have nothing to say to each other, Sentelle, and I suggest that you leave before I have you thrown out."

"Still the high and mighty son-of-a-bitch, are you? Too good for the rest of us. You DuPrees really have nerve—act like saints, all the while screwin' each other."

"Sentelle, I'll only say this once. State your business and get out!"

Sentelle sat back in the soft chair. He rubbed his callused palms over the striped silk covering. "You know I've

always wanted to live in a fancy place like this. You DuPrees have had it all your life. Now I think it's time you began to share a little of your luxury with us lower folks. Don't you?"

Quinton felt a rush of anger so intense that he could barely speak. The arrogance of the man! "Damn you, get out of my house! You've already done enough to my family as it is without coming here to insult us. Danielle is dead and now you come here to ruin Nicole's and my wedding day."

Sentelle nodded his head slowly up and down and smiled. "Speaking of Nicole, that's the reason I came tonight. I didn't come here to hurt anything, but to help."

"To help? By God, man, you have a nerve even to show your face here after the way you treated Danielle and Nicole."

Sentelle saw Quinton's anger and egged it on for his own purpose. He cocked a shaggy brow at Quinton. "Danielle was my wife. She may have opened her thighs to you before I met her, but she belonged to me. She got what she deserved."

Quinton trembled in rage. He turned abruptly away from Sentelle and marched into the library. He opened the drawer and drew out his pistol. He would kill the bastard who'd maligned Danielle's name. As he turned from the desk, he found Sentelle leaning casually against the closed door. "I'd put that away if I were you. There are things that you wouldn't want to become known, and if you shoot me, everyone will know."

Quinton lowered the pistol to the top of the desk. "What in the hell are you talking about? The game is up, Sentelle. You've played me like a fool, so now you had better explain yourself and be quick about it. My hand is itching to blow a hole through that slimy heart of yours."

NICOLE LA BELLE

"Now, that's not very friendly, DuPree. After me coming all this way when I heard you and Nicole was going to get hitched. Instead of threatening me, you should be offering me a drink of your fine whiskey and acting like a friend."

"Sentelle, you could never be my friend. Now spit it out. What is it you want?"

Grinning, Sentelle came forward and leaned on the desk with both fists. He looked directly into Quinton's eyes and said, "Gold, and plenty of it."

It was Quinton's turn to laugh at the absurdity of the man's request. "Gold? You're mad. You can't come in here and demand I pay you anything."

Rocking back and forth on his balled fists, Sentelle smiled. "Yes, I can, because I know your secret."

Quinton shook his dark head. "Sentelle, you must be mad. I have no secrets, especially none that I would pay you to keep quiet."

"I believe this is one you will pay handsomely to keep anyone from knowing, DuPree. You wouldn't want your family name and honor besmirched with incest, would you?"

Quinton froze. What in God's name was he talking about?

Sentelle, smug and self-satisfied, leaned back and put his hands in his pockets, his grin wider. "I'm talking about the incest asleep upstairs, dreaming of her wedding day with her father."

Quinton's skin turned a deathly white as he abruptly sat down in the large leather chair behind his desk. His eyes had widened as he looked up at Sentelle. "I don't believe you. Nicole is not my daughter. She's yours."

"That's what everyone thinks, but I found the note

Danielle left for you. Here, read this." Sentelle tossed the crumpled piece of paper at Quinton.

Quinton's finger's trembled as he recognized Danielle's handwriting. He moistened his dry lips as he read her letter and slowly shook his head. Briefly tears filled his eyes, and he leaned his head in his hands as his mind tried to comprehend what he had just read. Nicole was his daughter. His and Danielle's. All the pieces of the puzzle had finally fallen into place. That was the reason Danielle had run away with Sentelle. His beautiful Danielle had carried his child and would not ruin his name by letting anyone know that he was the father. What she had suffered because of her love for him! Even after all that, she had loved him up until the last moment of her life.

Quinton pressed away the tears and shook his head. It could not be true. It had to be another of Sentelle's tricks to try to get money from him. Quinton could not truly believe what lay in his hands. "It's not true," he said without looking at Sentelle.

"But it is, monsieur. Nicole is your daughter. I had suspected as much for some time. The note from her mother proves it."

Tears once more filled Quinton's eyes as he accepted the truth. Looking up at Sentelle, he said, "I still don't see how you plan to get any gold from me about this. Nicole is a lovely young woman, and I am proud to have her as my daughter."

"But how will everyone feel when they know you were going to marry your own daughter?"

Quinton's anger returned as he stood up and faced Sentelle. "Quite frankly, I don't care what people think. Nothing has happened between the two of us to make us ashamed of our relationship. Now, Sentelle, I would suggest you leave, for you'll get nothing from me."

Sentelle, fearing that his plan had failed, began to screech, "Damn you, DuPree. I'll tell everyone that the chit is your daughter. It will ruin you."

"Sentelle, you can tell whatever you like. Now, get the hell out of my house before I blow a hole so big through your rotten hide you could put your winter's catch in it. Get out!"

Rage swept through Sentelle at the sight of the gun Quinton had aimed at him. "DuPree, you'll be sorry for this."

Sentelle turned toward the door, and Quinton, thinking that he was leaving, turned to follow. At that moment Sentelle rushed him. As he and Sentelle fell to the floor, the impact knocked the gun from Quinton's hand. Sentelle grappled with Quinton, who hit Sentelle across the face, knocking him away. Quinton scrambled for the pistol, which had slid under the desk, but before he reached it Sentelle managed to knock his hand away and grab the pistol himself. Quinton wrestled Sentelle, trying to keep the gun away from him, but Sentelle placed his wide palm over Quinton's face and shoved him away. He drew the pistol down and fired. The bullet found its mark in Quinton's skull, splattering his blood and brains across the library floor.

Sentelle shifted his eyes nervously about the room. Making a quick decision, he placed the gun in Quinton's hand. He grabbed Danielle's note and straightened the overturned chair and articles on the desk that had been moved during the struggle. Quickly, he eased open the library door and glanced into the hall. It was empty. Sentelle quietly made his way back through the drawing room and out the French doors. No one had seen him enter, and no one would know of his presence at Live Oak. Mounting

his horse, Sentelle started down the long drive away from the scene of his crime.

Nicole awoke with a start and sat up in bed, scanning the shadows to see what had aroused her. Moonlight filtered softly through the lace curtains illuminating the room, but she could see nothing that would indicate why she'd been startled from sleep. She settled back against the pillows and closed her eyes and had begun to drift into sleep again when she heard a distant shout.

What on earth? she grumbled as she slid from the bed and put on her silk wrapper. Nicole opened the door and peered into the hall, only to find it empty. Hearing a rumble of voices from below, she crept silently to the head of the stairs and listened. Nicole could tell from the sounds that emanated from the library that an argument was in progress.

Curious, she descended the stairs on bare feet. With whom could Quinton be arguing? It was so unlike him to be angry, she thought. She hesitated as she reached the door to the library. At that moment Nicole heard her name mentioned. She felt awkward eavesdropping on the conversation, but after her earlier humiliation, she could not bring herself to open the door. Nicole listened to the indistinct rumble for a moment and had decided to return to her room when she heard Quinton's angry voice, "It's not true!" His words and tone made her abandon her resolve to go back upstairs.

"But it is, monsieur. Nicole is your daughter. I had suspected as much for some time. The note from her mother proves it."

The sound of the other voice made Nicole rigid with fear. Even had she wanted to enter the library, now she could not. She leaned heavily against the door as the

memories assaulted her. She trembled as his words began to penetrate her brain. *Nicole is your daughter*. The rest of the conversation was a blur to Nicole as she reread her mother's note in her mind. Time was suspended as the words beat at her brain, *He will love you as I do*. The only words Danielle had failed to write were, "as his daughter."

Nicole placed her hands over her face in shame as the magnitude of Sentelle's statement hit her. She reeled from the impact and groaned and she gripped her stomach. Nausea tore at her insides. Quinton was her father. She was going to marry her own father! Nicole stumbled toward the door. She had to get away from the immoral act that she'd been about to commit. Tears blinded her vision as she ran down the walk and toward the stables. She stumbled to her knees, ripping her silk wrapper and night dress. She did not try to regain her footing as her anguish washed over her, and she clawed at the dirt. Her nails broke as her hands grasped the sandy loam. Her head rolled from side to side against the ground as the sobs tore from her. Everything was gone—all that she had dreamed of had been snatched from her by two simple words. *Your daughter*. *Your daughter*. They reverberated over and over in her mind. In a vain effort to rid herself of the cruel words, she pulled handfuls of hair. It can't be! It can't be! her mind shouted as she crawled to her feet and began to run again toward the stables.

With shaking hands, Nicole finally managed to saddle the filly Quinton had given her. She climbed onto the horse and brutally kicked the animal in the side. It reared and began a mad gallop down the drive.

The reins were slack in her hands in her state of hysteria, and the frightened filly, now out of control, ran faster and faster.

Nicole felt degraded each time she thought of herself in

Quinton's arms. He'd been a lover, his kisses upon her lips, her response to his caress. *Your father. Your father!* The words whirled in her mind as she raced through the night. She tasted her own blood but did not feel the physical pain as she bit her lip. Danielle and Quinton, lovers. The thought ripped through her like a red-hot knife, severing every nerve.

Unmindful of the danger in which she had placed herself, Nicole did not try to stop the horse as it veered from the drive into the woods. Her tear-filled eyes, blinded by searing thoughts, did not see the low-hanging branch across the path the filly had taken. Not even the impact as she was thrown from the saddle registered. Her mind had already begun to retreat into a safer world. Nicole's last thoughts were a mixture of confusion as her head hit a large stone and blackness surrounded her.

Groggily, Nicole opened her eyes and groaned as a severe pain shot through her skull. In the dim light of the moon, Nicole could see an outline of a man as he bent over her and examined her bruised head. His touch pained her and she groaned again. Black shadows again danced before her eyes. "Are you all right?"

Nicole tried to shake her head, but the movement caused her agony. She raised a trembling hand to her head and felt a wet stickiness. As she drew her hand away she could see the blood that covered the tips of her fingers. Weakly, she answered, "I think so."

The man bent close to hear her whispered reply, and Nicole could see his shadowed features. "Good," he replied. "You had a bad fall. Can you get up?"

Nicole tried to raise herself on one elbow, but the effort was too much. She fell back and groaned. Tears escaped

the corners of her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. She was helpless to stop them. It hurt too much.

John Sentelle watched Nicole's feeble efforts with some amusement. He remembered the morning when she had fled the cabin in the swamps and he smiled to himself. She had refused to obey his orders, but now she was in his power again. Nicole was helpless to do anything against him. Glancing about the dark woods, Sentelle knew his time to be limited. He had to make a decision quickly about what to do with the girl. There were only two choices: to kill her or to take her with him. Sentelle decided and bent to pick up Nicole. He placed her on his horse and mounted behind her limp form. The pain of the movements sent Nicole into a faint, and she slumped against Sentelle as he headed the horse deeper into the woods.

As his mount made its way through the thick underbrush, Sentelle reached into his pocket and retrieved a piece of tobacco. He bit off a large chunk and rolled it inside his jaw as he looked down at Nicole's white face. He scratched his shaggy head and wondered how much she knew. He suspected Nicole had overheard the argument with DuPree and that was the reason she was so far from Live Oak so late in the night. How much she knew, he would have to find out. If she had heard the gunshot, then he would have to kill her. If not, he would keep her around to help out. He could use a strong young back around the cabin.

Chuckling to himself, Sentelle kicked the horse to a faster pace. He had to be out of the territory before anyone found Quinton's body. Glancing down at his unsuspecting victim, Sentelle smiled. They will probably think you killed him, since you fled on your own horse. Nobody saw me, so I've no worry. Spitting a stream of tobacco juice against a tall pine, Sentelle said, "This has worked out

better than I would have thought. At least I've got something to make me a little money."

John Sentelle ran his long fingers over Nicole's full, young breasts. Her flesh felt like silk to his callused hand. Cursing under his breath, he said, "Damn, you've rounded into a nice young thing, but it will do me no good." And as the miles passed, he remembered another young woman, an Indian woman he had known last winter. Had he not then taken what he felt his due, he'd not now be a eunuch. The Indians might have spared his life, Sentelle thought, but they sure enough held the woman higher than him. Damn them, they'd taken his manhood!

He'd have frozen to death, he knew, if he hadn't found shelter that day. Sure, it had been foolhardy of him to travel so far north without being better prepared. But the weather had been pleasant during the previous weeks, and he'd thought he'd be able to make it to the lakes and back to the campsite before winter closed in. With the freezing wind whistling through the tall trees and the snow nearly knee-deep, he had known that he had to find some place to wait out the blizzard. With disgust, he had dropped a heavy bundle of furs from his shoulder. They would have brought good money back in New Orleans, but he couldn't have risked carrying them.

Having slung his rifle across his shoulder, Sentelle started south. He hoped to find some sort of shelter—even a cave would look good to him now, Sentelle thought. Several hours later he felt that he'd walked clear across the continent. His beard was frozen and his fingers and toes numb. He was disoriented, unsure about whether he was still headed south. The frozen hell had him trapped, he thought, and then he saw the trail of smoke through the trees. Sentelle stumbled into the Indian camp and collapsed. When he

awoke, he found a beautiful Indian maid bent over him, in her hands a cup of steaming broth, which she urged him to drink. He was unable to bend his fingers, for they were wrapped in soft doeskin. But a smile of relief touched his raw, blistered lips when he realized that he could feel them and wiggle his toes as well.

As Sentelle watched the girl, he recognized the tribal emblem adorning her long, raven braids. She belonged to one of the tribes of Iroquois that lived in the area. He was thankful that he had been fortunate enough to accidentally come across a group of friendly Indians or he might now be hanging with his skin stripped from his body in the center of the village. Sentelle had learned their language years before when he had first begun to trap near the lakes.

"Maiden of the Iroquois," he said, "thank you for your generous care."

A gentle smile touched the young girl's lips as she bowed her head. "Mist of the Morning accepts your thanks, white man. Now you must rest and heal. The weather has begun to clear, and soon you will be able to return to your people."

Sentelle raised his battered hand and touched Mist of the Morning's smooth, dusky cheek. He shook his grizzled head and said, "I shall rest for now," and then watched her turn and busy herself once more with the soft leather she had been sewing. His eyes lingered on the soft curves of her hips and thighs as she sat on the hard packed-earth floor. Sentelle felt his manhood react. It had been many months since he had bedded a woman and the sight of her young girl's body so clearly outlined by the doeskin garment made Sentelle's mind turn from his weakened condition to the pleasurable aspect of lying with Mist of the Morning. As he drifted off to sleep he was already planning how to accomplish the act.

A week later Sentelle had regained all of his strength. The elder chief of the tribe had visited him several times and said that he was welcome to stay as long as he wanted. The weather had cleared, but the snow was still deep. Sentelle knew that he could now make it back to his camp, but the temptation of Mist of the Morning's young body held him back. Each day as she tended his needs, Sentelle's lust grew for the beautiful girl.

He watched her from a distance as he sat with the men of the tribe and shared their stories of hunting and trapping game. He began to grow restless with the simple Indian life, but he stayed on for Mist of the Morning. Finally when he could stand it no longer, Sentelle came to his decision. He would leave at first light the next morning but he would have Mist of the Morning that night.

As the cold winter wind whistled about the bark huts, Sentelle crept stealthily across the encampment and entered Mist of the Morning's dwelling. He clamped his hand across her mouth to stop her cry and quickly dragged her squirming body back to his hut. He threw her on the pile of furs and fell on top of her before she could manage to escape. Sentelle kept his hand over her mouth as he jerked up above her waist the doeskin garment. He did not try to lull her into submission with caresses and sweet words. Sentelle considered her a savage. When animals mated there was no foreplay, and Sentelle thought of the Indians in the same manner. He gave no thought to kindness as he spread her slender thighs and plunged deep within her tender body.

Tears of pain cascaded down Mist of the Morning's dusky rose-tinted cheeks as Sentelle brutally raped her. His lust spent and his seed smeared on to the insides of her smooth thighs and mingled with her virgin's blood, he lifted himself away. Mist of the Morning lay still. Her

dark eyes glazed with humiliation and pain. She was soiled now and no brave would take her for his wife. Slowly she crawled to the corner of the hut and covered herself with a fur. She watched in silence as Sentelle adjusted his clothing and gathered his things together as he prepared to leave the village. Sentelle glanced at the young girl and smiled. "That was what I been waiting for."

When he had left, Mist of the Morning stumbled to her feet and staggered naked out into the snow. Her eyes were dry as she made her way toward the chief's hut. She pushed the leather covering away from the door and fell to the hard earth. The chief had awakened instantly at the sound of her entrance. As he knelt by her battered body, Mist of the Morning wept her story.

The black eyes of the old chief glittered with vengeance as he summoned the council. They would see the white man punished. Little thought was given to the young girl who'd been degraded by Sentelle. It was only after the Indians finished with Sentelle that Mist of the Morning was noted missing. They found her naked body frozen among the ice in the river. She had taken large stones and broken through to drown herself.

The Indians had found Sentelle easily from the tracks he'd left in the snow. He had fought them at first but was quickly overwhelmed. There were simply too many of them.

"Whiteman," the Indian chief had said when they had him in hand, "you eat our meat and sleep in our huts and thank us by taking our unmarried maiden to your pallet. Now you will feel our revenge. I will not kill you, white man. You will live, and pay for the rest of your life for your evil act."

Muttering angrily to himself, Sentelle now looked down at Nicole. She was a beauty, all right. The past two years

had only added to her perfection. He had known it before she had run away, but fear of incest held him from consummating his desire. Now it was no longer possible to have his desire—the Indians had seen to that. But he could use her. She'd bring him money, because there were other men who'd pay well for the privilege of taking her to their bed. He'd take her to the trappers' camp, where there were many who would gladly part with a goodly chunk of gold to share this beauty's bed. "Yep," he said, "if you don't know too much, you can make me a pretty penny."

As dawn lightened the sky, John Sentelle decided that he was far enough away from Live Oak to make camp. Nicole had not regained consciousness, and her added weight had wearied his mount. He did not stop out of consideration for the young woman who lay slumped against him, but for his horse. Whether she lived or died was of no matter, but Sentelle knew he could not do without his horse. It was his means of escape. It would still be several days before he reached the camp, and he could not take the chance of losing the animal.

After reining in his mount in a small clearing, he dragged Nicole's limp form from the saddle and laid her down. He paid no heed to her comfort but busied himself with making a small fire and feeding his horse before he checked to see how she had fared.

Sentelle noted that a slight flush had brightened her pale cheeks. He touched her forehead, to find her burning with fever. With reluctance, he covered her with his blanket before he fixed himself a breakfast of coffee and beans. As he swallowed the last sip of the hot black brew, he heard the crackling of leaves and turned, to see Nicole thrashing restlessly about. Throwing the last of the coffee on the fire, he went to her side. Her blue eyes were glazed from

NICOLE LA BELLE

the fever and she pushed the blanket away, groaning as her movements put pressure on her battered head.

Sentelle raised her enough to see what damage had been done and found that the cut had reopened and was bleeding. Taking a rag from his saddlebag, he bound it about Nicole's head. Shrugging his shoulders as he finished the job, he thought, That's all I can do. If you make it, you make it. If not, what the hell. Lying down next to the sick young woman, Sentelle was soon snoring.

The buzzing of mosquitoes and the bright sun awoke Sentelle. He slapped at the pesky insects as he sat up and stretched. Looking down at the girl beside him, he touched her forehead and found it cooler. She lay quietly and seemed to sleep peacefully.

Sentelle relit the fire and made himself more coffee. He found a hard biscuit in his saddlebags as well as a piece of jerky and proceeded to enjoy his supper. When his hunger had been satisfied and his gear put away, he returned to Nicole. Sentelle tried to arouse her but could not. Damn, he thought, this is turning out to be more trouble than it's worth.

Saddling his horse, Sentelle once more placed Nicole's limp form in front of him and headed north.



CHAPTER 7

It had been over a week since Quinton's body had been interred in the dark loam of the DuPree family cemetery at Live Oak. But for Emily Chandler time had stood still. She could still see the coffin being lowered into the earth and feel the agony of her grief for the man she had loved for so long.

Emily dabbed at her reddened eyes and looked at the rich plantation that surrounded her. The warm summer breeze gently caressed the landscape, its soothing fingers ruffling the dark green foliage of the large magnolia that grew nearby. She balled the damp lawn handkerchief in her hand as tears welled again in her eyes.

"It should all have been mine," she said, her gaze resting on the beautiful manor house. "I should have been the mistress here from the beginning, and not Cecilia." Fresh tears slipped down her ivory cheeks as she thought of the past.

Only two years separated the sisters, Emily and Cecilia

Kensington. But a good deal more than age divided them in looks and personality.

Emily's eyes were dark brown, her hair a brilliant shade of auburn that shimmered with golden lights. Emily Kensington did nothing meekly. When she loved, it was with a possessive intensity, and when she hated, it was with implacable animosity. Should she be wronged, Emily would go to any lengths to seek revenge. Conversely, should anyone be unjustly accused, Emily would fight tenaciously to see that things were put right. Cecila, on the other hand, was the epitome of delicate femininity, with golden hair and cornflower-blue eyes. She was docile by nature, gentle and forgiving. And while Emily was equally as beautiful as Cecila, she had always felt large and clumsy compared to her younger sibling. It was to Cecila that the young men always flocked. Looking at Cecila's grave now, Emily felt again the keen rivalry. Cecila was like a bit of fluff, adorable to hold and to cuddle. "All the men worshiped at your feet," Emily cried. "But you know, I didn't hate you. I knew you could not help how you looked or acted. I loved you as everyone else did, even when Quinton chose you instead of me. He was the only man I ever loved. Still, I could not have hated you. Your sweet and gentle heart would not let me despise you."

Emily wiped her eyes and looked at the dark mound of freshly dug earth that rested beside her sister's grave. "No, you never knew, did you, Quinton? You didn't know how much I loved you, even before you married Cecila. How I cried that day. Poor Mama and Papa thought they were tears of happiness for the joy you both shared. They never suspected the true reason for my tears. Why couldn't you have loved me, Quinton? I would have made a better wife than Cecila. I could have given you children

as I did Alexander. Alex could have, should have, been your son. I know you only married Cecila for her dowry. Why couldn't it have been me? My dowry was just as large."

Emily looked to her sister's resting place and continued to speak softly the thoughts she'd kept locked away for so long. "Even Alexander was not immune to your charms, Cecila. He only married me because you fell in love with Quinton. I knew how he felt before I married him. But I tried to be a good wife. I never let him know that I even suspected his affection for you. Oh, how we pay through the years," Emily said, her head moving from side to side. "When Alexander died, I grieved for him as I did for you, Cecila. Yet I felt a sense of relief. I was once more free, as was Quinton, and I thought I would then have a chance to win his love. But that did not happen. Danielle's daughter came and took his love as her mother did so many years before. She was so much like Danielle, Cecila. She was not satisfied with just having Quinton's love. Being the mistress of Live Oak and the wife of its master was not enough. She wanted it all without being encumbered by a man old enough to be her father. So she schemed and planned until Quinton made his will in her favor and then she killed him. Cecila, I make you this promise, she will pay with her own life for that deed! I will see that Alex hunts her down and brings her back to Live Oak to be punished."

Emily's grief threatened to overcome her. She choked back a sob as she pressed her balled fist against her mouth and let the tears flow unheeded down her pale cheeks. Her shoulders shook and her auburn hair cascaded about her face as she lowered her head and cried.

She did not realize that she was no longer alone with her

memories; her son knelt beside her and pulled her into his strong embrace. He brushed her hair back from her damp face and said gently, "Mother, it's time for us to return to Kensington. There is nothing more to be done here."

Emily wiped away her tears and looked up into her son's handsome face. A tentative smile touched her lips as she let him help her to her feet. She lightly caressed his cheek before she once more looked at the graves. "Wait for me in the carriage. I'll only be a moment longer."

Alex's eyes scanned Emily's tired face, and he shook his head. "No, Mother. You can't keep this up. You've come every day to the cemetery and it's got to stop. You'll make yourself sick. I know you cared deeply for Quinton, but you can't keep grieving this way."

A hysterical laugh escaped Emily as she looked at the mound of black dirt. The irony of her son's words mocked her. Alex would never know the extent of her feeling for his uncle. Yet he would know why she had come to visit the graves each day. It was not her grief alone that brought her. Emily found it much easier to plan her revenge when she looked down at the cold stones that graced the head of Quinton's and Cecila's resting place.

Emily was silent as her thoughts traveled over the events that had led to this moment. Then turning slowly to her son, she said, "You're right, Alex. I did care deeply for Quinton, but that's not the only reason for my coming here. I had to sort out everything in my mind. We have discussed it and I'm sure it is the only possible answer. Nicole Sentelle murdered Quinton."

Alex's expression was grim. He had known from the moment he'd been told of Quinton's death that it could not have been suicide, as the sheriff believed. Quinton loved

life too much to even contemplate such a thing. Someone had taken his gun and made it look like suicide. And there didn't seem much doubt as to who that someone might be. Nicole Sentelle was the most likely person, except that she had run off the night Quinton died. Alex never did understand why. Did she think she would let things cool and return later to claim the plantation?

As Alex led his mother away from the family plot, he remembered the afternoon he had met Nicole. He had come to Live Oak with the intention of finding out exactly how the young woman felt about his uncle. He had been warned by his mother, yet he had to find out for himself what the girl was like. He had been surprised by the look of love that came into Nicole's dark blue eyes when she looked at his uncle and doubly so when she became upset by the thought of Quinton's death when his will had been discussed. Everything did not fall neatly into place as Alex would have liked. There were just too many questions, he thought as her beautiful face and warm smile appeared in his memory.

It was a mystery Alex was determined to solve. He had already set the process into motion by posting notices all over New Orleans asking the whereabouts of Nicole Sentelle.

Alex helped Emily into the shiny black carriage before he glanced once more toward the cemetery. "Mother, you know I agree with you, but how can we be positive that it was Nicole who killed Quinton?"

Emily's red-rimmed eyes widened in disbelief. "Who else had anything to gain?" she questioned and waved her arms to encompass the expanse of land that surrounded them. "Look about! You can see what the woman wanted. She did not want a good, kind man twice her age. She

wanted Live Oak! As I told you before all this happened, she's nothing but slime from the swamps."

Alex climbed into the carriage and set the horses into motion before he answered. "I see your point, Mother, but she truly seemed to love Quinton."

Emily released a disgusted sigh as she looked at her son. She shook her head in wonder at the gullibility of all males to female wiles. "Alex! I thought you were not so easily duped by a pretty face and the swish of skirts. I did not think I had nurtured a fool! Don't you understand? It was all an act. She had to convince everyone that she loved Quinton so she could get her hands on Live Oak! If she is Danielle's daughter, I wouldn't put it past them to have planned it for years. It would be the only way for Danielle and that husband of hers to get Live Oak back."

Alex still felt some doubt, but he pushed it from his mind. His mother's argument was convincing. It was the only plausible explanation. Nicole had managed to work her way into Quinton's affections, and when she found he had changed his will in her favor, she killed him.

Alex, appalled at such duplicity, determined that the murder of this man, whom he loved as a father, was in some way to be avenged. If it turned out that the beautiful Nicole was responsible, then so be it. She would hang, and Alex would be the one to place the noose about that slim alabaster throat of hers.

"Mother, we will have retribution. I can promise you that. I will find Nicole, and if it takes the rest of my life, she will pay for what she has done to our family. One way or another, she'll pay!"

Emily squeezed her son's hand in return, and a smile of contentment played across her lips as she settled back against the leather seat. "I knew I could count on you,

Alex," she said as her grief evaporated into thoughts of revenge. When Nicole was hanged for Quinton's murder, Emily would be satisfied, because the moment the trap-door slipped from beneath Nicole's feet, she would have paid for taking Quinton's love from Emily. And compensated, as well, for Emily's lifetime of disappointment.



CHAPTER 8

Awakened by the sound of Nicole's cry, Sentelle stared with bloodshot eyes at the small form on the cot. He'd passed out in the chair by the fireplace after a long evening of corn whiskey. Stumbling to his feet, he made his way to the cot and squinted down at her. "So, you've decided to rejoin the living. It's about time. I was getting pretty damn tired of sleeping on the pallet by the fire."

At the sound of his voice, Nicole peered up at him, the effort causing shards of agony in her skull. "Where am I?" she asked, her voice barely audible.

Sentelle chuckled to himself and ran his fingers over his bearded chin. The girl had no memory. "At home," he said, containing his delight. "Where else did you think you'd be?"

A puzzled frown creased Nicole's brow as she gazed about the log cabin. She did not recognize her surroundings, nor did she know the man who stood before her. The exertion only increased the pain in her head. Her mind was a complete blank. She felt bewildered as she turned to look

at the unkempt man again. It was as if she were a newborn babe, opening her eyes to the world for the first time.

Sentelle smiled as he observed her confusion. Bending close so he could study Nicole's reaction to the question, he asked, "Don't you remember anything, Nicole?"

Nicole's throat was parched, and he could barely hear her negative response.

Sentelle pulled the chair beside the cot and sat down. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back. Everything was going to work as he had planned. "Well, now, I guess you're wondering who I am and what happened to you."

Nicole could only nod her answer. Her mouth felt as if it contained cotton, and her tongue would not work properly it was so dry.

Sentelle scratched his head as the lies came quickly to his lips. "I'm John Sentelle. You were out gathering firewood several weeks ago and fell and hit your head. You've had a pretty bad fever. For a while I thought you weren't going to make it. Now it looks like you'll be up and about in a few days and can make this place habitable again."

Nicole peered at the dirty cabin and shuddered at the thought. It was no more than a pigsty. Tin cans and dirty clothes littered the floor. The one small table was covered with unwashed dishes and pans. Flies buzzed over the remains of food and around animal pelts that hung from the ceiling. The stink of the curing pelts permeated the air of the confined area. The sight and smell made the bile rise in Nicole's throat, and she closed her eyes to still the nausea. "May I have some water?"

Sentelle dipped a tin cup into a wooden bucket and handed it to Nicole. He helped her to sit up to drink. She nearly gagged at the sight of the grease film that covered

the water, but her thirst made her drink it. Queasy and faint, Nicole lay back on the rough pillow. "I think I'll try to sleep."

Sentelle smiled as he set down the tin cup. "You do that for now. You've got to regain your strength, 'cause there's lots that needs doing around here." He pulled the motheaten blanket up over Nicole, and as she drifted into sleep, he said, "Plenty to do, my girl. It's been hard to keep the men away even while you were unconscious." Touching his pocket, he jingled the coins. "I've already got everything lined up for you."

Seeing Nicole sleeping peacefully, Sentelle left the cabin. As he latched the door behind him, he placed his hands on his hips and surveyed the camp. His dark eyes glinted with mirth as he threw back his head and laughed. Danielle, he thought, you cheated me out of your inheritance, but that little gal will help make up for it. Sentelle scratched his belly and continued to laugh as he strolled toward the other end of the camp. There the trappers had erected a tent that served as a makeshift saloon to wile away the hours playing cards and drinking corn whiskey.

Nicole remained in bed another week, intermittently sleeping and eating the greasy stew that Sentelle brought her. She had not regained her memory, but some of her strength was returning. Her cheeks were once more touched lightly with a tint of rose, and her hands did not tremble quite as much when she tried to sit up on the narrow cot.

Nicole tried to question Sentelle about her past but failed to learn from him any more than he'd earlier divulged. She attempted to force herself to remember, but this did no more than add to her discomfort by way of unbearable headaches.

The heat in the cabin was stifling as Sentelle brought Nicole's evening meal to the cot. Handing her the tin

plate, he said, "Don't you think it's about time you got out of that bed and made yourself useful?"

Nicole saw the angry glint in Sentelle's eyes as she took the plate into her trembling hands. She tried to quell the uneasy feeling that had begun to build in the pit of her stomach. As she spoke she hoped her words would ease some of the tension she felt in the air. "I'm sorry to have caused you so much trouble. I am grateful for the care you have given me while I was ill."

Sentelle seated himself in the rickety chair beside the cot, rolled the wad of tobacco in his jaw, and watched Nicole eat. "I'll be well paid for the trouble," he said in a slow drawl.

Nicole furrowed her brow, the spoonful of stew held halfway to her mouth. Her eyes scanned the cluttered cabin briefly before returning to Sentelle's grinning countenance. She was willing to repay his kindness by working to make his home livable. She would gladly submit to such service. Yet she sensed some hidden meaning to his words. It was not so much what he said as the way his eyes roved over her body. It made Nicole uncomfortable, but she pushed aside the disquiet she felt and offered a tentative smile. "I'll do my best to get this place cleaned up, John."

Sentelle threw back his head and laughed. "It's not by way of your housekeeping that coins will jingle in my pocket, girl. It's what your customers will pay after they've spent an evening with you that will repay the debt. Your abundant charms have insured that my pockets will be lined with gold for some time to come."

Nicole's eyes widened and the spoon she held clattered noisily to the floor. His announcement had shaken her. "My customers? What do you mean? I don't understand."

Rubbing his beard with grimy fingers, Sentelle leaned

back in his chair and watched Nicole in the same way that he watched the animals he trapped. "Well, as I see it, you only have two choices. Either you entertain my friends with your lovely body, or I turn you over to the law."

The color left Nicole's cheeks as she stared at him. "The law?" she questioned.

Enjoying the moment to its fullest, Sentelle took his time in answering. "Oh, didn't I tell you? You're wanted for the murder of your lover."

Nicole could not believe what she was hearing. She leaned against the rough wall of the cabin and closed her eyes. She felt sick with revulsion. She could not be a murderer, could she? She tried desperately to recall something of the past, anything that would give her even a clue, but her mind remained empty of all memory beyond the past week.

At last Nicole spoke, her voice a mere whisper, but her words clear and certain in the face of his revolting demand. "I don't believe you. I haven't killed anyone. I couldn't."

"Well, that's not what you told me when you begged me to help you escape. You said you'd killed your lover when I found you wandering in the swamp and that the law was after you. You pleaded so prettily that I could not refuse to help you, so I brought you here," Sentelle said and waved his hand in the direction of the camp.

Nicole rubbed her aching temples and shook her head. "It's not true and I won't do as you ask."

A dull flush crept over Sentelle's features as his patience came to an end. With a sudden lunge, he slapped the plate from Nicole's hand and grabbed her by the shoulders. He pushed her down on the cot and ripped the remains of her silk gown from her body and his mouth descended upon hers. Nicole fought with what strength she possessed, but

it was useless. Sentelle quickly overpowered her and she lay helplessly beneath his weight.

Sentelle ran his hands through her tangled black curls and pressed his callused palms against her temples. "It would be so easy to crush your lovely skull. So very easy to snap away what little life remains in you. But you are valuable to me, so I'll not harm you now. But if you do not do what I ask, I *will* break your neck, without the slightest hesitation. Better yet, I will turn you over to the law and they will see to your punishment."

Nicole felt weak and confused, trapped as much by the mental battering as by the physical pressure of his body on hers.

Sentelle climbed from the cot. "Murder is not condoned, no matter how pretty and innocent-looking the perpetrator. Now get your ass out of that bed and start getting this place cleaned up. Tomorrow night we will have quite a few guests."

Nicole quickly pulled the blanket up to cover her nakedness. She rubbed her hand across her mouth to remove the feel of Sentelle's lips against her own.

He saw the revulsion his touch aroused and bent over her, his voice a snarl. "That kiss is only a sample of what you will receive." Turning toward the door, Sentelle laughed and said, "Rest well, because you'll need it."

Nicole pressed her balled fist against her mouth to keep from screaming. She curled herself into a fetal position to still the trembling in her limbs. Her mind kept repeating Sentelle's words, *Murderer. Murderer. You murdered your lover*. Nicole's teeth left marks in her white knuckles as his words assaulted her brain.

Nicole remained in that position for hours. Her mind sought answers to questions where there were none. Finally the trembling began to abate, and she opened her eyes to

stare at the dim interior of the cabin. I have to get away, she thought.

Her determination began to grow. She might not remember her mother, yet the stubborn pride that Danielle had instilled in the young girl was still present. Nicole knew that she could not let herself be used in such a vile manner no matter what she had to face in the future.

As Nicole began to plan her escape from Sentelle, she realized that she had nothing to wear, with the exception of her torn nightdress. Slipping weakly from the bed, Nicole began to search the cabin. After digging through Sentelle's clothes, she finally found a shirt and a pair of leather britches. Both garments were too large for her, but they did offer more protection than what she wore. She slipped into them and to accommodate them to her size rolled up the sleeves and legs and tied the waist with a narrow strip of leather. Glancing down at her odd outfit, she shrugged her shoulders. "It will have to do."

Her movements made the neck of the shirt slip from her shoulders, to reveal her smooth white skin. She quickly readjusted the shirt and started toward the door. She was ready to make her escape. Her flight was brought to an abrupt halt by a sharp splinter in her bare foot. With the pain came the knowledge that she had forgotten the most important item: shoes. Nicole knew that she could never travel far in her bare feet. Spying a pair of worn moccasins under the cot, she quickly got them and slipped them on. They swallowed her small feet. She searched the cabin for a means to adjust them and came upon several rags, lying on the table that she thought might serve her purpose. Nicole stuffed them in the toes and tied several thin strips of leather across the moccasins until they were tightly bound to her feet. She smiled to herself at her own ingenuity.

The sound of stumbling footsteps alerted Nicole that

Sentelle was returning. Quickly, she slid onto the cot and pulled the blanket to her chin. She closed her eyes and pretended to be sleeping while she prayed that when Sentelle entered the cabin, he'd not try to awaken her. Certainly he'd guess her purpose were he to notice the change of clothes. But when she heard his movements as he staggered into the cabin, a sense of relief swept through her. He was drunk. Sentelle stumbled past her cot and to his pallet by the fire and was soon snoring.

Easing her feet to the floor, Nicole silently crept toward the door. If she could slip from the cabin unnoticed, she would have all night to accomplish her escape. She suspected that the whiskey Sentelle had consumed would keep him asleep late into the following morning.

A board creaked as she stealthily moved across the rough floor. Nicole held her breath and waited until the sound of another loud snore assured her that Sentelle still slept. Quickly she pressed her hands against the door, to keep it from squeaking, and slowly opened it.

The brisk night air was a welcome relief as she slipped silently from the cabin. Nicole took a deep breath of the fresh air as she leaned weakly against the cabin and wiped the film of perspiration from her forehead. Glancing about the camp to make sure that no one saw her movements, Nicole crept around the cabin and into the woods. Her breath came in ragged gasps as she slowly made her way through the thick underbrush. Her strength was quickly waning, and tiny shadows danced before her eyes as she pushed her endurance to the limit.

When finally Nicole stumbled and fell to the forest floor, tears of frustration came to her eyes. Held by her own physical weakness, she felt as trapped as she had in Sentelle's cabin. There came the sound of crackling leaves, and she felt a clutch of fear as the face of a man appeared.

"Well, what have we here?" he asked, hunkered beside her.

With a strength fed by fear, Nicole rolled away from him. She knew that she'd not return to Sentelle without a fight. She was able to bring herself to her feet, but the man grabbed her and she was again on the ground. "Hold on, girl. There ain't no need to run off. I ain't going to hurt you," the man said as he struggled to hold the wriggling young woman. "Where did you come from?" he asked.

Nicole refused to answer. She continued to struggle, but his hold only tightened. "Calm down, girl, before I have to do something that I don't like." His voice held a hint of anger as he shook her.

Nicole's teeth chattered, and her remaining strength deserted her. "Please, don't hurt me," she said, her sense of defeat overwhelming.

The stranger's voice softened. "I told you I wouldn't hurt you, but I can't let a young slip of a thing like you go into hysterics, now, can I?" He smiled down at Nicole, and she saw a flash of even white teeth. "Now will you answer my question?"

"The trappers' camp," she said, fear tightening her voice and giving the words a strangled sound.

"Well, since you're lost, I'll just help you find your way back there," he said as he pulled her to her feet.

Nicole swayed as all hope evaporated into the cool night air. "No, please don't take me back," she said and collapsed.

A puzzled look crossed the man's rugged face as he studied the young girl at his feet. He glanced about the wood to ascertain whether they were alone, then came to a decision. Gently he picked up Nicole and put her on his horse and headed north. Nicole was unaware of his movements. She had once more lapsed into unconsciousness.

The sun was shining brightly as the stranger reined in his horse in front of a log cabin. "Emma!" he shouted as he lifted the limp girl from his saddle. "Open up. It's me, Sam."

The cabin door was instantly opened and a short, plump woman hurried out. A bright smile lit her pleasant face at the sight of her husband. When she saw the girl in his arms a tiny perplexed frown creased her brow. "Sam, who on earth is that?" she asked as she led the way into the cabin.

"That I can't say, Emma. I found her wandering about in the woods. She's sick and needs our help."

"Well, what are you standing there for, you big oaf? Put her to bed and let me see to her."

Sam smiled at his wife and admonished her good-naturedly. "Now, Emma, don't be so bossy. I was planning on putting her down. She's been like this for two days and I'm about tuckered out from holding her on the horse."

Emma looked at her husband, loving every inch of his big-boned body. "Tuckered out! Hmm! This tiny thing wouldn't tucker anybody out unless he had been in town drinking up all his hard earned money."

Sam laid Nicole on the bed and turned to his wife. Placing his large hands in front of him and hunching his shoulders in a gesture of innocence, Sam cajoled softly, "Now, Emma, love. Would I do that, knowing what a wonderful woman I had waiting at home?"

Emma could not keep the laughter from her voice, and her light blue eyes twinkled with mirth as she shooed her husband from the room. "No more of those sweet words, you rascal. I know you better than that. Go on with you now, so I can see to this child."

Bending over Nicole's unconscious form, Emma's merri-

ment disappeared as she touched her forehead and found it cool. Her brow wrinkled as she wondered what could ail the girl. She didn't know what would cause such a state without some sign of fever. Gently she felt through Nicole's dark curls, searching every inch of her head for some explanation. When her fingers touched the jagged scar, she nodded her head and smiled to herself. That explained it. This young'un had a really hard bump on the head, she thought as she pulled the blanket over Nicole and tucked it about her.

Emma found Sam at the kitchen table, happily sipping coffee. Seating herself across from him, she glanced toward the bedroom. "Where did you find her, Sam?"

"She was about a mile from the trappers' camp downriver. You know the one I'm talking about, Emma. That bunch that cause all the trouble when they go into town."

Emma nodded. "Did the girl come from there?"

Sam shrugged his large shoulders. "I don't rightly know for sure, Emma. All I know is before she collapsed I offered to take her back and she begged me not to. What could I do, then, but bring her here until we know more about her."

Emma reached across the table and patted her husband's hand affectionately. "You did the right thing. By the looks of her, she wouldn't last long with that wild bunch."

"That's what I thought. When I first found her she fought me like a wildcat, but when she thought I was taking her back to camp, all the fight left her and she fainted at my feet. I wonder who she is."

"We'll just have to wait until she can tell us, Sam. And I don't know how long that will be. She's had a bad knock on the head some time back, and that could be the reason for her condition now. We'll just have to wait and see," Emma said, her eyes full of concern.

As the sun's first rays filtered through the tall pines, Emma placed a fluffy batch of biscuits in the oven. Sam had gone fishing at first light and she could see his tall figure as he now made his way back up the trail from the creek. The trout he had caught dangled at his side on a long forked stick. A smile made small dimples dent her plump cheeks as she gazed lovingly at the tall red-haired man. He was her life.

As she watched him stride up the path covered with pine needles she could not help but think of the objections her parents had had against their marriage. They did not want her to marry a trapper, because they thought her life would be too hard. To a certain extent her parents had been right, but Emma had never regretted a day of their marriage. Even in the winter, when Sam was away setting his traps and collecting his catch, Emma did not feel any remorse. As the cold winds whistled about the cabin she waited patiently for her man to return. She was lonely when Sam was away and often worried about him as the snows deepened, but she never let him know it. Each time he returned, she greeted him with a happy smile and his favorite meal, keeping her concerns to herself.

They weren't rich in material possessions, but they were exceedingly rich in their love. The only flaw to their happiness over the past fifteen years was the fact they hadn't been able to have children. Both had longed for a large family, and for years Emma had prayed each month that her menses would not come and that she carried a child. Now, after so many years of hoping, Emma had finally put that dream aside and was content just to be with the man she loved.

After hanging the fish on the porch, Sam entered the cabin and affectionately patted Emma on her round bottom.

“Um, woman, something smells good. I feel like I could eat a horse.”

“Well, that won’t be necessary. I’ve got fried rabbit for your breakfast, and I guess that’s a relief to old Molly. She’ll thank me for not letting her be your breakfast,” Emma said as she pulled the light golden-brown biscuits from the hot oven and placed them in front of Sam with a large bowl of butter.

“You know how to keep a man happy, Emma. That’s for sure.” Sam buttered a biscuit and began to eat. The yellow butter melted and edged Sam’s wide lips. Wiping it away with his fingers, Sam nodded in the direction of the bedroom. “How’s our guest this morning? Has she come around yet?”

“I thought I saw her move when I checked on her before breakfast, but I can’t be sure. Her color is a lot better today, though.”

As though to confirm the diagnosis, Nicole groaned and alerted Sam and Emma that she was regaining consciousness. They both hurried to the bedroom, to find her leaning on one elbow and trying to slide her feet to the floor. “Whoa now, girl,” Sam said as he entered the small room. “You’re too weak to get out of bed.”

“Who are you? Where am I?” Nicole sputtered, her eyes wild with fear.

Emma stepped forward and smiled at the young girl. Her bright blue eyes and rosy cheeks combined with her friendly smile helped ease some of Nicole’s apprehensions. She bent and eased Nicole’s feet back under the blanket and tucked in the edges. “I’m Emma Bailey and this is my husband, Sam. He found you wandering in the woods and brought you back here to our cabin. How do you feel?”

Nicole massaged her temple to ease the ache. “My head

still hurts, but I feel stronger. How long have I been here?"

"Since yesterday afternoon, but you have been unconscious for about three days. How did you get such a knock on your head?" Emma asked as she settled her rotund little figure in the chair beside the bed.

"I don't really know. They told me I fell while gathering firewood. Could I please have a drink of water?" Nicole asked. Her throat was dry and scratchy from lack of nourishment.

"Of course you can, dear. Sam, get the young lady a drink."

Sam nodded his head and mumbled something under his breath as he left the two women alone. "Pay no attention to him. If he can't grumble about something, he's not happy," Emma reassured the young girl.

Nicole smiled her thanks as Sam returned with the water. She took the cup in trembling hands and greedily drank it. She licked the last drops from her soft lips and handed the cup to Emma. "Thank you. That was delicious."

Emma set the cup on the nearby table and turned once more to Nicole. "Now, who are you, my dear?"

Nicole glanced uncertainly from Sam to Emma. She was afraid to tell them her name, as Sentelle's words echoed in her mind. If the law were truly looking for her, these people, no matter how kind they seemed, might turn her over to them.

Emma patted her arm reassuringly as she read the fear in Nicole's large blue eyes. "There's nothing to be afraid of here. We won't hurt you."

Tears crept from beneath her heavy lashes and slid unheeded down her smooth cheeks as Nicole closed her eyes. These were the first kind people she had seen and she was deeply affected. Her eyes shimmered as they came

to rest on Emma and Sam. She could not lie to them. "I know only that my name is Nicole. I don't remember my last name, or anything else.

Emma looked from the distressed young woman to her husband. Tears of pity moistened her own eyes. Sam shrugged his shoulders, incapable of handling the situation. He'd rather face a mountain lion than a woman's tears.

"Now, now," Emma said as she took Nicole's hand within her own. "There's no need for tears. You're with friends now. You rest and I'll bring you something to eat. We'll have you on your feet in no time at all."

Sam cleared his throat at the touching scene before him. Emma needed children. She had so much love to give. It was apparent in her actions toward the young woman.

"Sam, you sit here and keep Nicole company while I fix her some breakfast. She looks about starved. But we'll have her fattened up in no time at all," Emma said as she vacated the chair and busily shooed her husband into it.

Nicole watched as the large ruddy man sat down, and then she glanced about the neatly kept bedroom. It was only a log cabin, but Emma's touch was everywhere, from the brightly colored curtains to the patchwork quilt on the bed. It was luxurious next to Sentelle's hovel.

Nicole's appraisal of the room was cut short as Sam spoke. He had watched Nicole gaze about the room in wonder, and his curiosity overcame him. "Don't you remember anything, Nicole?"

Nicole shook her head and replied, "Only the last week or so." She was afraid to answer too much of his question. This man's own straightforward manner drew on Nicole's honesty, and she feared that she'd give herself away if she said too much.

"Why were you running away from the trappers' camp?"

Sam asked, and he watched as her blue eyes widened in surprise.

"How did you know I came from the trappers' camp?" Nicole asked as her fingers began to knead the quilt nervously.

"You were about a half mile from the camp when I found you. I thought you were lost and said I would take you back, but you begged me not to. Don't you remember?" Sam watched Nicole's gaze shift in the direction of the door. Nicole reminded Sam of a frightened rabbit he had once seen cornered by a fox. She wanted to escape but did not know in which direction to run.

"Hold on, now. There's no need to be frightened. I won't take you back unless you want me to, so don't get any ideas about running off. In your shape you wouldn't make it to the front door." Sam said in an attempt to ease Nicole's apprehension.

Nicole took Sam's big-boned hand into her own, her eyes pleading. "I never want to go back there. I would rather die."

Sam's gentle eyes smiled down at Nicole and he patted her hand reassuringly. "Well, it's all settled. You'll stay here with Emma and me until you feel well enough to return to wherever you came from. With Emma's good cooking you'll be fit as a fiddle in no time at all."

Tears of relief brimmed in Nicole's eyes as she lay back on the fluffy pillow. She was safe at least for a while.



CHAPTER 9

As the warm summer months progressed, Nicole began to recover under Emma's constant care. Her headaches disappeared, and she had regained the weight she'd lost, plied by Emma's rich, nourishing food. Only a few days after Nicole had arrived, she was allowed to leave her bed and sit in the sunlight on the front porch. From there she'd watch Emma and Sam at work at their daily chores while she worked to try to remember her past, a chore that proved to be of little success.

Before long, Nicole began to help Emma gather eggs and prepare their meals. When she tried to help with the laundry, Emma scolded her not to overdo. She treated Nicole as if she were her daughter, and each of them found solace in the relationship that developed between them.

Sam watched the growing affection with apprehension. He knew that the girl belonged somewhere else and probably had a family who deeply grieved her disappearance. Yet his main concern was for Emma, not Nicole. When the young woman's memory returned and she left them,

Emma would be devastated. "Damn!" he said as he heard their cheerful laughter in the kitchen. "What will it do to Emma?" The axe Sam held bit deeply into the log he chopped for firewood.

"Sam," Nicole called as she came around the side of the cabin. "It's time for supper." Nicole saw the frown that wrinkled his sweat-beaded brow, and knew the man was deeply troubled. "What's wrong, Sam?"

Sam swung the axe once more and embedded it deeply within the log. Wiping his hands and face with a red bandanna, he turned to Nicole and asked, "Have you remembered anything from your past, Nicole?"

Sam's question took Nicole by surprise. Since that first day, neither of the Baileys had ever mentioned her lack of memory. They had treated her as though she had always belonged with them, as though she were part of their family. His words sent a chill of apprehension up Nicole's spine. She paled and her fingers played nervously across the soft calico dress Emma had cut down for her to wear. "No, Sam, I haven't. Do you want me to leave?" Nicole bit her lower lip to stay its trembling. She had not meant to ask the question, but it was out and now could not be recalled. Nicole was afraid to hear Sam's answer, because she didn't want to leave the place where she'd found so much love and peace.

Sam shook his shaggy red head, "No. That was not my reason for asking. You're welcome to stay as long as you like. I was just worried about Emma."

"Emma? Have I done something to hurt Emma?" Nicole asked.

"No, girl, you don't understand. It's going to hurt Emma like hell when you leave. She sees you as the daughter we never had, and I can't stand the thought of her being hurt."

Nicole smiled, and a sense of relief swept over her. Impetuously, she threw her arms about Sam. "I wouldn't hurt Emma for anything in the world. I love her too, Sam. Even if I regain my memory there will always be a place in my heart for her."

Sam pulled away from Nicole's embrace and looked down into her face. He saw sincerity plainly written in her eyes. His fears allayed, he placed a strong arm about Nicole's slender shoulders and they walked together toward the cabin. "I hope what you say is true, girl. That woman means more to me than anything else in the world."

Emma was standing in the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron as they approached. "Hey, you two. What's all this gabbing about when I've got chicken and dumplings waiting on the table?"

"Ah, nothing to concern you, woman. We were just talking about a fat little hen we both love." Sam laughed as he pinched one of Emma's rosy cheeks.

Pushing him playfully in the direction of the table, Emma said, "Well, I hope it's not the one we're having for supper."

As Sam settled himself at the table Emma hugged him about the neck and looked affectionately at Nicole. "I hope someday you'll be as lucky as I have been. If you are, you'll find a great hulking oaf like this whom you can't live without." Ruffling Sam's red hair, Emma kissed his cheek before she began filling their plates.

Sam's ruddy complexion reddened even more. "Ah, go on with you, woman. You know the reason I keep you around here is because of your cooking."

All three laughed at his jest and settled down to enjoy Emma's delicious meal. As Nicole ate the fluffy dumplings and the tender bits of chicken, she glanced at the two people across from her. She had watched their loving

exchange, and at the sweet sight a tiny flash of memory stirred deep within her mind. She sensed that she had also been loved like that at one time. The more Nicole searched her mind, the more sure of it she became. But where and by whom? Those questions remained unanswered.

After supper the three sat in the twilight, enjoying the still, hot evening. Except for the sounds of crickets and a whippoorwill that called to its mate, all was quiet, as were the three who sat silently, each engrossed in his own thoughts. Emma crocheted and Sam whittled a small piece of wood. Nicole relaxed with her hands folded in her lap and dreamily stared at the rainbow of colors left in the sky by the setting sun. She was at peace in the Baileys' small world and knew that she could remain there forever without the slightest hesitation.

Their pleasant interlude was interrupted by a lone rider as he approached the cabin. Nicole did not recognize the man, but Sam did and shouted his welcome to the newcomer. "Alex Chandler! What are you doing this far north at this time of year? There are no pelts to buy now."

Alex dismounted as Sam stepped down from the porch to greet his visitor. The two men shook hands, and Sam turned to the women. "Emma, heat up the dumplings. I know Alex is starved."

Alex held out his arms to Emma and swung her off her feet. "Put me down, Alex! That's no way to treat an old married lady."

Alex's laughter rumbled in his chest as he said, "If it's you, Emma, it is. Now, how about those dumplings? Sam's right. I am starved."

Nicole remained seated in the shadows as she watched the friendly exchange. At the sight of the stranger, her fears of being arrested for murder resurfaced. She prayed that Emma and Sam would forget about her so she might

slip away unnoticed, but as Emma turned to her she knew that her prayer went unanswered.

"Alex, we have another guest." Emma said as she pulled Nicole to her feet. "Nicole, this is a dear friend of ours, Alex Chandler."

"Nicole?" Alex asked, his suspicions aroused.

"I'm afraid I can't give her another name, because she can't remember it. But it doesn't matter to us, because we love her just as Nicole." Emma hugged Nicole, then turned to open the door of the cabin, illuminating the area in which she stood. Alex could not quite believe what he saw. He'd searched everywhere for Nicole during these past months, even followed leads that took him as far away as St. Louis. By now all reasonable thought on the subject of Quinton's death had left him, and he was as maniacal as his mother was in his quest for vengeance. But to find Nicole at the home of his friends Sam and Emma Bailey and standing there without a flicker of recognition in her eyes was something he couldn't quite take in.

Sam had read Alex's face well. He'd been doing business with Alex these past two years and had come to respect and admire the young man. Whatever it was between him and Nicole, they'd have to sort out themselves. For now there wasn't much he could do, except to try to ease the tension. "Well, Alex, how about some of those dumplings?"

Alex gave himself a mental shake so he could respond as though nothing were out of the ordinary. He forced a smile to his lips. "It is a pleasure, Nicole. Won't you join us inside while I feast on Emma's latest delicacies?"

Sam made the first move toward the door as he again broke the silence. "Of course she will. None of us wants to miss the latest news from New Orleans. It will be a treat for the women."

Sam bit his lower lip as he nervously watched Alex seat himself at the table. He glanced at Emma as she set a heaping plate in front of their visitor. The time has come, he said to himself as he sat down at the table.

Alex took a large bite of Emma's fluffy dumplings and glanced up to see her hovering anxiously by his side awaiting news from the city. Chuckling, he placed his fork by his plate and shook his head. "Well, I see I won't be able to eat until Emma's curiosity has been satisfied."

Sam grinned and nodded his head. "You know my little woman, Alex. She's always starved for gossip."

Emma laughed and tapped Sam playfully on the shoulder. "Hush, now, and let Alex talk." Both men threw back their heads and laughed at the bright glow of excitement that filled Emma's eyes.

Alex took a long sip of his coffee and leaned back in his chair as he prolonged Emma's torture. He smiled as he noted a slight frown crease her brow. Emma pulled her chair close to Alex's so as not to miss a word of what he said. Alex patted her hand and started by telling her about President Tyler's visit to the city, which he'd had to extend by several days because of the rush of society matrons, anxious to give balls in his honor.

"And balls they did give!" he said, making his tale as dramatic as possible for Emma's sake. "Each one perpetrated an even greater extravagance to outdo the other. Madame Boisenea gave a ball that had a Golden Night theme. Decorated the whole house in gold and even gold-leafed several of her footmen for the occasion. She nearly bankrupted her husband with the expense and almost killed the young boys who'd been gold-leafed."

Sam humphed, but he was enjoying Alex's performance quite as much as Emma was.

Alex chuckled and went on. "But Tyler attended with-

out complaint every ball given. He dares not insult anyone. He'll be up for reelection next year and needs all the support he can get."

Becoming more serious, Alex went on to talk of Tyler's determination to stop Congress from creating corporations within states without consent of the state. "And there's Texas to think about," he added. "If he annexes it, I think he can win back some of the support he's lost."

Sam leaned forward, as anxious for the political gossip as the ladies were for news of fashion and social events. "What do you think of the situation, Alex?"

Alex was in favor of the annexation, he said. "There's land there, and plenty of it, that can benefit the poor dirt farmers headed that way from the south." He enumerated the internal problems of Texas and the threat of annexation again by Mexico.

Emma began to fidget. It wasn't that she hadn't any concern for what happened to the country but more that she was starved for frivolous talk. It had been so long since she'd had any part of the excitement of city life. "I want to hear about the fashions," she chided.

Alex looked at Sam and they laughed. "Emma's about to burst," Alex said, "so I'll tell her about Madame Gardiner's hooped skirts."

A while later, Emma's curiosity slaked, Alex returned to his now cold dumplings. As he finished his meal, his mood became somber. He wiped his lips and laid the napkin beside his empty plate and turned to Sam. "I also have some bad news. Quinton is dead." He glanced at Nicole, his dark eyes searching her face for a reaction to his words. He saw none. My God, what an actress she is, he thought as he quickly picked up his coffee cup and took a long sip of the dark brew. He had to do something with his hands or they'd be on that ivory throat of hers.

Sam shook his head as he commiserated with his friend on the loss. "I'm sorry to hear that, Alex. I know how much he meant to you. How did it happen?"

"We're not completely sure. Most think it was suicide."

Alex's gaze never left Nicole's face, and he was surprised as a look of compassion filled her blue eyes. He saw no look of guilt or remorse for the deeds she had done. He looked upon her pity as another clever act of deception. What a cold-hearted bitch you are! The bitterness Alex felt was disguised as he asked pleasantly, "How did it happen that you can't remember your name, Nicole?"

Nicole was startled by his direct question. She glanced nervously to Emma and Sam for help, but none was forthcoming. Swallowing the lump that had quickly come to her throat, she said, "They said I hit my head on a rock while gathering firewood. I don't really know how it happened, because I can't remember anything except the past few weeks."

Alex leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest as he smiled at Nicole. How clever, he thought, and so convenient. The smile on Alex's lips did not reach his dark flashing eyes as he stared angrily at Nicole.

Sam saw the look on Alex's face and quickly interrupted the conversation. He wanted to head off the storm he felt brewing within Alex. "I found her wandering in the woods and she collapsed. I brought her here to Emma. You know what a good nurse she is and how nothing suits her better than having someone to pamper."

Alex smiled at his hostess and took her hand in his own. "Sam, you know I'll never forget it. If it had not been for Emma's nursing that winter when you found me caught in that steel trap, I would not be here now. I owe my life to the two of you."

Embarrassed by the praise, Emma quickly pulled her

hand away from Alex. "Pooh! Alex Chandler, you're too ornery to kill."

The three laughed at Emma's jest. Nicole tried to smile, but it was a feeble attempt. Alex's dark gaze had returned to her face and she blushed. Her confusion spread as he asked, "So you don't remember anything. You don't even recognize me, do you?"

Nicole felt the blood drain from her face. She shook her head as she weakly mouthed the word no. Unable to say anything else, she sensed that the peace she had found was about to be shattered.

Sam had been expecting something like this but could not keep the surprise from his voice as he and Emma asked in unison, "You know Nicole?"

Alex's dark eyes sparkled with malice as he smiled lazily at the young woman. "I should—she's my wife."

Startled, Nicole jumped to her feet. The chair in which she sat tumbled to the floor with a crash as she stared down at Alex. "Your wife? But I don't know you."

A bright smile spread over Emma's face. "Oh, Alex," she said, "I couldn't have asked for anything more."

She hugged Nicole and kissed her cheek. "You're Nicole Chandler! Oh, my dear, dear, sweet Nicole, I'm so happy for you."

Alex watched Nicole's reaction with surprise and dismay. He had hoped to draw her from her charade. Instead she appeared shocked. Looking at the joy in Emma's face, and in Sam's, he did not relish the thought of having to tell them that the young woman they had come to love was a murderer. Of course, there wasn't any real evidence of that fact, but Alex was convinced that Quinton had not committed suicide. He'd known his uncle too well to believe him capable of so cowardly an act. And who else had anything to gain from Quinton's death? Only Nicole, who would

not now need to marry to have control of Live Oak. She'd probably run away to avoid answering any questions. Once things quieted down she would have returned to claim her prize. Alex was sure of that.

Perhaps he should tell Sam and Emma. No—it could not be helped. He would in any case have an easier time getting Nicole away from the Baileys if it was thought they were married. He liked them too much to hurt them.

While his mind whirled with these thoughts, Nicole stood quietly, her own mind incapable of grasping what had been said. Emma congratulated Alex, but Sam noticed Nicole's discomfort and put his arm about her. "I know it's a shock to find you have a husband, but it will all work out. You'll remember soon and all will be well. Alex is a good man."

Nicole shook her head and looked into Sam's gentle eyes. She was on the verge of tears, and her eyes shimmered in the lamp light as she said, "This can't be. I don't know the man. Why is he saying these things, Sam?"

Sam patted Nicole awkwardly on the shoulder in an effort to soothe her. "Hush now. You're just upset." Straightening the chair, he seated Nicole once again at the table as he said, "Emma, bring out the whiskey. I think this calls for a drink."

Nicole leaned her elbows on the table and covered her face with her hands to hide her distress. "Why are you saying I'm your wife?"

Alex leaned forward and smiled, his voice soft as he said, "Because, my dear, you are. I have searched far and wide for you. How you lost your memory, I don't know. The last time I saw you was in New Orleans. You ran away after we had a quarrel. Now I've come to take you back home so we can patch up our differences."

The softness of his words was deceptive, because when

she looked into his hard, angry eyes she knew that he meant otherwise.

Nicole's own anger was aroused by his impudence. "I don't believe you!" she said, defiant. "I would remember having a husband!"

Emma saw the battle line being drawn between them and quickly interceded. "Now dear, how could you know that? You had some bad experiences, but you don't remember how you were hurt," she soothed. "You're lucky that Alex has found you and wants to mend things between you."

Nicole's eyes pleaded with Emma and Sam to understand the lie that was being perpetrated against her. For what reason, she could not fathom, but Nicole felt with every fiber of her being that this stranger was not her husband, no matter what he said.

Sam filled the glasses and handed one to Nicole. "Drink this. It will help."

Nicole swallowed the whiskey and it burned down her throat and into her stomach. She coughed, and the tears she'd been trying to hide brimmed in her eyes. Humiliated for having let her weakness show, Nicole ran from the room. She fell across the soft down mattress of the bed and wept as she beat her hands on the pillow. "Oh, why can't I remember!"

Emma followed her and, seating herself beside Nicole, she pulled her into her motherly arms. Their comforting presence made Nicole cry even harder. Emma brushed her dark curls from her face and kissed her forehead. "Hush, now, or you'll make yourself sick. Nicole, I've come to love you like my own daughter, but I can't say I am displeased that Alex is your husband. We've known him for several years and he's become dear to us too. I know you don't believe what he says, but Alex is an honest man.

If you are his wife, I know that I have not lost you. I was so afraid you would regain your memory and return to your own family. Now I know I'll see you again."

Nicole wiped the moisture from her eyes as she sat up and looked into Emma's loving gaze. "Emma, I love you. You and Sam have been so good to me, and I don't want to leave you. That man is not my husband. I just know it. Please let me stay here."

Tears brimmed in Emma's eyes and gently slid down her rosy cheeks. "Nicole, I would love for you to stay with us for the rest of our lives, but you belong with your husband. You can come for long visits, and after a while you can bring my grandchildren." Emma hugged Nicole to her bosom. "Darling, we will miss you terribly, but all birds have to leave the nest sometime."

Nicole shook her head as she pulled free of Emma's embrace. She lay back on the pillows and covered her eyes with her arm. "Grandchildren? Emma, how can you even think of such a thing when I don't even know the man."

The bitterness of Nicole's words hurt Emma, but she could understand the girl's turmoil. How could anyone expect her to be resigned to such a fate when she could not remember Alex? He might be her husband, but to Nicole it would be like bedding a stranger. Emma closed her eyes briefly as she thought of how terrifying it would be to the young woman. She looked down at the pale figure on the bed and touched her tear-stained cheek lightly as she rose from the bed. "Try to rest. In the morning everything will look different. Good night, my love."

Nicole saw the sadness on Emma's face. She realized the hurt she had caused and quickly clasped Emma's hand. "Emma, I'm sorry. Forgive me, but it has been such a shock. If ever I have children, you will be their grandmother."

Emma placed a brief kiss on Nicole's cheek. "Thank

you," she said and then left Nicole to sort things out for herself.

Alex had watched Emma's retreating figure as she followed Nicole. He casually propped a booted foot on the chair and leaned back to light a cheroot. Neither he nor Sam spoke for a long while, each lost in his thoughts. They shared the silence until Sam could stand it no longer. Too many questions invaded his mind. "Alex, what in the hell is going on? I know you, and it's not like you to be so callous. Couldn't you have been a little more gentle with Nicole? Did you have to shock her with the fact of your marriage?"

Alex looked at his friend and his control snapped. His eyes were like dark orbs, his face flushed. He leaned forward and placed both hands on the table. "Shocked her with the fact? Don't you think it was a shock for me to find her hundreds of miles away from home? I have searched for her for nearly three months!"

Standing abruptly, he turned his back to his friend. Alex stared into the fire and kicked a dead ember with the toe of his boot. "Sam, there are things between Nicole and me that you don't understand. And it's just as well, for the time being. But I can assure you that everything will work out."

Sam was trying to discern the meaning behind Alex's words when Emma returned. She surmised from his expression that there had been as much anger and hurt from Alex as she'd found in Nicole. Her own distress clearly evident, Emma said, "Alex, I'll make you a pallet in here for tonight."

Alex had no intention of letting Nicole slip through his fingers as he slept. No, she would remain at his side until he turned her over to the law in New Orleans. He let his dark gaze rest briefly on Emma. She was such a fine

woman, so good that she could not see evil in anyone. "That won't be necessary," he said gently. "I will sleep with my wife tonight."

"You can't mean that, Alex. You have to give the girl time to adjust to the fact of having a husband, much less sharing his bed," Emma protested.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Emma. I know you care for Nicole, but she is my wife. I can only promise you that I will behave properly until she realizes that fact."

The relief Alex's words brought was plainly written on both the Baileys' faces. At least Alex was gentleman enough to understand the girl's plight. Sam placed his arm about his wife's shoulders as he said, "Emma, it's none of our affair. Alex is right. She is his wife. Come to bed now and let the young'uns work it out for themselves."

As Emma left the room she turned back to Alex. "Remember your promise. It's a hard time for her. She's been through a lot lately."

Alex gave Emma a bow of assent. He would keep his promise. Making love to the woman who had killed his uncle was the last thought in his mind. All he wanted to do was break her neck.

As the couple left the room, Alex straightened his back and ran bronzed fingers through his hair. It is now time to see how well you play the game, my dear, he thought as he opened the curtain between the two rooms.

Alex surveyed the woman, who lay curled on the bed. His masculinity appreciated the sight. He could not deny that fact. Had the circumstances been different, Alex knew that he would not have hesitated a moment before seducing so lovely a creature.

Nicole sensed Alex's presence before she opened her eyes. His masculine fragrance filled the room. The scent of whiskey, tobacco, and leather emanated from him as he

sat down on the side of the bed to remove his boots. Nicole tried to feign sleep, but the sound of his boots hitting the floor made her eyes fly open. She looked at the strong muscular back that presented itself to her and realized his intent. "What are you doing in here?" Nicole asked as she tried to crawl from the bed.

"Now, that's a funny question to ask your husband." Alex said as he grabbed her roughly by the arm and forced her back onto the bed. "I have every right to be here and you know it."

Nicole's eyes fluttered wide with fright as she looked at him. "You have no right to come into my bed. I don't even know you!" she protested and she tried again to move from the bed.

Alex's eyes narrowed as he pushed her to the other side of the soft down mattress. He was disgusted with Nicole's game, and his muscles ached from the day's journey.

Savagely his gaze raked her slender figure. "You don't have to worry tonight, my dear. I'm too tired to bother with you even if I wanted to bed you. The game you are playing is about at an end; tomorrow we return to New Orleans. I'm not about to sleep on a pallet on the floor when there is a soft bed available. Go to sleep, because we leave early in the morning."

Nicole huddled against the wall and pulled the blanket tight against her. Alex noted to his satisfaction the fear in Nicole's eyes as she searched for a means of escape. "You might as well forget it, Nicole. This time you won't get away from me so easily." Alex reached out and took a long lock of her hair and wound it about his hand. "This should let me know if you try to get away." He smiled at Nicole as he settled himself comfortably beside her.

Nicole tried to pull free of him, but her hair, tangled about his lean fingers, held her fast. Alex chuckled at her

futile attempt. "This is nearly as convenient as a rope. I'm a light sleeper, so the slightest move will awaken me."

Trembling, Nicole lay back and pressed her eyes tightly closed. She had no memory of her past and was petrified by the prospect of her future. If the treatment she was receiving was any hint of what lay ahead, Nicole did not want to contemplate her destiny. It was too awesome.



CHAPTER 10

Nicole awoke with a start, bright morning sun slashing at her eyes as it streamed through the window and across the bed. Alex, with a surprising smile on his face, lay casually propped up on one elbow.

“It’s about time you awoke. We have to get started if we’re to make any progress today.” He unwound the silken strands of her hair from his hand and flexed his fingers.

“Please don’t take me with you,” Nicole said as she sat up and brushed dark curls from her face. She’d spent most of the night thinking about how she could stop him from taking her away from the safety she’d found with the Baileys.

But Alex was involved in his own thoughts. She is enchanting, he mused, and he ran his finger down the curve of her softly flushed cheek. “Not take you with me?” he murmured. “But I have no choice. You are my wife.”

Nicole brushed away his questing hand. “Stop it!” she

said. "You know I'm not your wife. What kind of game are you playing? Did Sentelle send you after me? Is it some plan of his to get me back?"

Alex's eyes narrowed. So, you do remember, he thought. You know your father and everything else. A fresh wave of anger washed over him as he realized how Nicole had deceived Emma and Sam. They had given her their love and care, and in return the little vixen had given them nothing but lies. The muscles in his jaw twitched, but his tone was deceptively soft as he said, "I thought you couldn't remember anything from your past, Nicole."

Nicole realized her mistake instantly. She had let Sentelle's name slip out in her anger and stuttered in her confusion, "I can't remember."

Hard lines formed about Alex's lips and he arched his brow. "How is it, then, you know John Sentelle?"

Nicole lowered her eyes and turned from his penetrating gaze while jumbled thoughts ran through her mind. Could this be the man to whom Sentelle had referred when he accused me of murder? Had he survived after all and now was he set on a course of revenge against me? There was no love in his dark eyes as he intently watched her every move. Or could he be a friend of Sentelle's sent here to lure her away from the people who would protect her? Alex's strong fingers cupped her chin and forced her to look him in the eye. "Answer me! How do you know Sentelle?"

Nicole did not know what to think. She could not ask the question without incriminating herself. Tears of frustration brimmed in her eyes before she closed them to hide her confusion. Her voice was no more than a whisper as she said, "I awoke in his cabin after my fall. *That* is all I know."

Emma interrupted their conversation as she tapped on

the wall. "Breakfast is ready, you sleepyheads. Hot biscuits and fried chicken. You had better hurry if you want any. Sam is already making a huge dent in them."

Alex released Nicole and began pulling on his boots. As he stood, he turned and said, "We will finish this conversation tonight." With that he left the room.

Nicole rubbed her bruised chin. She could hear Alex as he slid out a chair from under the table. "Pass the biscuits, Sam. It's my turn to enjoy Emma's good cooking. You, lucky rascal, can do it anytime."

Nicole listened as the three made small talk over their meal. She could not bring herself to join them. To look upon the happy faces of Emma and Sam would be her undoing.

Nicole heard Sam and Alex leave the cabin just as Emma peered into the room. "I've saved you several hot biscuits and some chicken," Emma said as if she were involved in some great conspiracy.

Nicole smiled at Emma's secretive manner and climbed from the bed. "How did you manage that?" she asked as she hugged her friend.

"With those two devouring everything in sight, believe me, it wasn't easy." Emma giggled as she led the way into the kitchen.

Nicole seated herself at the table, and Emma brought her breakfast. Her eyes scanned the cheerful interior of the cabin, and her throat constricted. She leaned on her elbow and hid her face from Emma's view. She could hardly bear the thought of leaving. She had found warmth and security here, and deep in her heart, Nicole knew that these had not come often into her life.

Emma sensed Nicole's depression and seated herself across from her. There were things she had to say.

"You'll be leaving us soon," she began. "Alex and

Sam are readying the horses now. I want you to remember that you always have a home here if you ever need us.” Emma stopped, her own feelings of loss too strong to deny. But she couldn’t make it any more difficult for Nicole than she knew it was already. There was no way to stop Alex. Even Sam would not allow her to put herself between a man and his wife. If she could just make Nicole aware that she was there for her, perhaps that would give the child strength.

Nicole, as though reading Emma’s thoughts, reached across the table and took Emma’s hand. “You and Sam have given me a lot, Emma, and it’s helped. You’ll always be family to me, and I know I can come to you if ever there is need. I have come to love you both very much.”

Alex entered just at that moment and, seeing the women as they now appeared, felt a flash of anger again. The woman’s duplicity was more than he could bear. His voice was harsh as he said, “Are you about ready? It’s getting late and we need to get started.”

Nicole appeared resigned as she smiled at Emma, but her lips trembled when she spoke. “Thank you, Emma, for all you have done. I’ll never be able to tell you how much it has meant to me.”

Emma held the young woman close, tears cascading down her cheeks. “Good-bye, my dear. Remember what I said.”

“I will,” Nicole said, and, swallowing back her own tears, she left the cabin. Her throat tight with emotion, her heart breaking for herself and for Emma, Nicole let Sam help her into the saddle. She looked into his good-natured face and saw a suspicious brightness in his eyes. She gave him a weak smile and squeezed his hand, then turned her horse to leave the clearing. She couldn’t look back at the couple, who now stood within each other’s embrace as

they watched Nicole and Alex begin their journey south.

Alex led the way down the trail from the Bailey farm. He intended to follow it to Cottersville, a small town along the river. There they would leave the horses for Sam to pick up later, and Alex would secure passage on the *River Queen*. The steamboat would take them to New Orleans. Alex felt it a more comfortable way to travel and a deterrent, should Nicole decide to escape him. He looked back at Nicole. They would have to spend a night on the trail before reaching Cottersville, and he was determined that she not flee. He decided that if need be, he would tie her to a tree. A smile played across his face as he looked at her dejected figure. She deserved even worse treatment. It wouldn't hurt the little baggage to spend a night tied with the horses.

Nicole slumped in the saddle as they rode along. The depression she had felt earlier was now magnified tenfold and settled itself around Nicole like a heavy blanket. I need you, Emma, her heart cried, but she knew Emma couldn't help her. No one could.

They rode steadily all day except for a stop for a lunch of cold chicken and biscuits that Emma had prepared. Alex ate without hesitation; the ride had made him ravenous. He showed no concern for Nicole's lack of appetite, and when he'd finished his meal, their silent journey continued.

By late afternoon as the sun began to sink behind the tall pines, Nicole felt near collapse. A dull ache had formed over her temples during the long ride through the hot midday sun and continued through the day. So it was with relief that she watched Alex rein in his horse. "We'll camp here," he said.

Alex ignored Nicole as she slid from the saddle and slumped near a large pine tree. The tension had tightened the muscles across her forehead, and she rubbed them to

relieve the ache. She wanted only to close her eyes to rest them, but as her lashes settled against her cheeks, she was instantly asleep.

While Alex gathered firewood, the sun laced the sky with vivid orange and lavender, then sank below the horizon, and it began to grow dark. Alex soon had a fire going, and he made coffee to accompany the remains of their lunch, which he secured from his saddlebag. "Supper's ready," he called to Nicole, and he settled himself in front of the fire with a steaming cup of coffee.

The sound of his voice startled Nicole from her sleep. Disoriented, it took her a few minutes to realize where she was. By now the dull ache in her head had become, for the first time in weeks, an agonizing pain. Slowly she gained her feet and made her way to the fire, where she gratefully accepted the cup of coffee Alex offered. Her stomach felt queasy, and her head continued to throb. When she tried to swallow the hot bitter brew, her stomach rebelled. She choked back the bile that rose in her throat and set down the cup. "I think I'll just sleep awhile."

Alex either didn't or wouldn't accept that she felt ill. He handed the cup back to her. "No, I think not. We have much to discuss tonight. There is no one else about now, Nicole, so I would advise you answer my questions."

"Please," Nicole said faintly, "I need to sleep."

Alex snorted in disgust. "You won't get off that easy. You're going to answer my questions one way or the other." He picked up a small keen stick and tapped his dusty boot. "Do you understand my meaning?"

Nicole's pain-glazed eyes widened in fright. "Alex, please, I will answer your questions later. I need to sleep now."

For the first time Alex noted her pallor and the dark

shadows beneath her wary eyes. "Are you ill?" he asked, and came to her side.

"My head aches, but I'll be all right once I have slept. It's the only thing that helps." As she spoke she rubbed her hand across her eyes to shield them from the firelight, which sent tiny splinters of pain through her.

"How long have you had headaches?" Alex said as he hunkered down beside her.

The sound of his voice only aggravated her agony, and she weakly said, "Since my accident."

Alex smiled to himself as he thought, So this was another ploy, as was her lack of memory. She is tired and does not want to answer my questions. Abruptly he changed the subject. "How did you know Sentelle?"

"Please, Alex," Nicole said before his hard fingers captured her face and made her look at him.

"I asked you a question," he said as he increased the pressure on her soft flesh.

It took a moment for Nicole to realize in her pain-numbed mind that she would find no relief until she answered. "I told you this morning. I awoke in his cabin after my fall."

"How did you get to his cabin? And what were you doing with Sentelle?" Alex said as his anger overcame him.

"I don't know! I can't remember!"

"Damn you for a liar," Alex said as he pushed her away from him. "Tell me, or you will pay dearly for your lies."

Why wouldn't he believe her? Why wouldn't he let her be? There was so much hate in him, and all of it directed toward her. If only her head would stop hurting.

Nicole swayed and would have sunk to the ground but

for the tree branch she'd caught. But Alex wouldn't give up. He continued to badger her.

Too weak to parry his questions or to stand his verbal abuse, Nicole finally relented. "I'll tell you everything," she said, "only let me sit down."

"Be my guest, madam," he said, extending his hand toward the ground, and then took a seat beside her.

Nicole recounted how she'd awakened in Sentelle's cabin and that he'd told her no more than her name and his. "He gave me food and water to help me through my illness, and I thought he was my friend as he'd said, until the night I escaped the camp." Remembering, Nicole trembled, and though Alex saw her distress, he remained silent and waited for her to continue.

Nicole found it difficult to talk about what she had experienced and she stumbled over the words, and they came in halting clumps. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she lowered her head, shamed at what she'd had to tell Alex about how Sentelle meant to use her. But she would not tell him the rest. Let him kill her. She would not tell him that Sentelle had called her a murderer.

Her head on her knees, her arms wrapped about them, she rocked to and fro, weeping. Alex reached out and with gentle pressure stopped her tormented movements. She brushed the silken strands from her face to look up at him and saw written across his face a mixture of pity and disbelief. He pulled her gently into his arms and held her close. Alex had no explanation for what he did; his own emotions had been touched in a way he did not understand. The woman might be all and more of what he suspected, but at this moment she needed his support and comfort.

The warmth of his embrace swept over Nicole and gave her a momentary sense of security. She pressed her face against Alex's strong chest, and the steady rhythm of his

heart helped ease the tension she felt. This was the first kindness he'd shown her, and she was grateful.

"Hush, now. Lie down near the fire and try to sleep. You'll need your rest, because we have another day of riding before we reach Cottersville, late tomorrow," Alex said as he tried to pull away from Nicole. She had wrapped her arms tightly about him, her eyes pleading, her voice soft. "Please, don't leave me."

Alex was paralyzed. Had he the strength of Samson, he would not have been able to free himself of her embrace. He lay down beside Nicole and held her to him. He smoothed back her hair and listened as her sobs lessened and she drifted into sleep. As his lean fingers wound through her silken curls, Alex stared into the star-filled night. Remorse swept through him, and confusion. His emotions pulled first in one direction then another.

Alex forced the troublesome thoughts from his mind and tried to sleep. He couldn't. The warm young body pressed close to his stirred his senses and his desire flamed. It had been a long while since he'd bedded a woman. Nicole, lying so innocently in his arms, was too tempting. He shifted his weight away from her in the hope of alleviating the tightness in his loins. But as he moved, Nicole snuggled even closer.

Am I wrong about her? he asked himself. Or is this another ploy?

Alex was certain that Nicole could not be innocent of men. She had lived too long with Quinton at Live Oak. The looks he'd seen pass between them ruled out any question of innocence. Then what's holding me back? he asked in the dark night. Alex could not answer his own question. He quickly slipped from her side and covered her with a blanket before he seated himself across the fire, away from her. He needed the distance between them.

Alex studied Nicole's features as the dancing flames cast their light upon her. She was beautiful. Quinton had always been a good man. For as long as Alex had known his uncle, Quinton had always had control of his emotions. But could any man, even Quinton, keep his hands off someone as lovely as Nicole?

Alex mulled the question all through the night, and as dawn began to lighten the sky he did finally manage to sleep.

The sun shining on Alex's face awoke him. His mood did not match the warm, bright day. The short nap had not rested his weary body nor improved his disposition. Alex's irascibility was apparent as he threw the wood onto the warm embers to rebuild the fire. He kicked at a stone as he made his way to the horses and grumbled under his breath as he saddled them. When he had his and Nicole's breakfast ready he woke her. Her smile did not help Alex's foul temper. "Get up and eat. We have to get going," he ordered.

Nicole's expression changed as she took in his mood. He'd reverted to his usual bad nature. Her headache was gone and she felt well again. Shrugging her shoulders, Nicole decided that she had lived through worse and it was best to keep her peace. Nicole picked up her plate and looked tentatively at Alex, who was devouring his breakfast. There was not a trace of softness about the man who sat across from her. His dour countenance forbade any conversation. The set of his jaw and the tilt of his head seemed to say beware the unwary. Nicole took the warning and ate her breakfast of beans and cold biscuits without complaint.

Alex poured the remaining coffee over the fire and stomped off to the horses. He was already in the saddle when Nicole finished her breakfast and walked, a bit

stiffly, to her horse. He knew that she was not used to such strenuous activity and assumed that her muscles were sore from the constant movement. A hot bath would ease her discomfort, and he would see to it when they reached Cottersville that evening. Turning his horse back onto the trail, Alex began their silent journey to town.

The sun had begun to sink behind the tall pines as the couple rode down the hard-packed clay street. They had reached Cottersville, but Nicole was too exhausted to note the clapboard town. She welcomed the sight of the inn in which they would stay the night. Nicole felt as if she had been in the saddle all her life. Her muscles cried out in weariness and refused to move as she made an effort to climb from the saddle. Alex came to her rescue, and Nicole did not protest when he lifted her down. His sour mood had disappeared during the afternoon, and now his behavior was that of a gentleman. He escorted Nicole into the inn and helped her up the stairs to their room. Before leaving the inn to stable the horses, Alex ordered a bath to be sent up for Nicole, and a bottle of wine with their supper.

Nicole slumped wearily in a chair until the maid and two young boys brought the tub and hot water for her bath. At the sight of it, her energy surged. She quickly sent the small group away, stripped off her clothes, and with a sigh of relief settled her tired body into the hot water. Nicole relaxed and let the warmth soothe her troubled mind as well as her aching body. Too tired to try to understand the man who claimed to be her husband, she decided to live each moment as it came, putting aside the confusion of her attempts to remember her past.

Alex stretched his tired muscles as he walked to the stables. He could understand Nicole's weariness when his

own muscles rebelled after the long day's ride. They had not stopped for lunch along the trail, since Alex had been anxious to reach the town before nightfall. Now his stomach let him know that it was time he had some food. Once he'd seen to the care of the horses, Alex headed back toward the inn. Nicole, he judged, must be done with her bath by now. He welcomed the thought of a bath himself as he became aware of the scent of horseflesh that clung to him. His muscles ached as he climbed the stairs. Supper, a hot bath, and a soft bed were paramount in his mind as he opened the door to their room.

Alex was unprepared for the sight that met his eyes. It took his breath. Nicole had just finished bathing and stood naked in the tub. Alex's dark gaze traveled from the slender hand that patted the crystal droplets of water from her alabaster throat down to her firm, young breasts. It lingered briefly on the ivory mounds with their small rose nipples. He moistened his dry lips as his eyes devoured the vision before him. From Nicole's small waist his gaze sought the dark triangle that nestled between her long graceful legs.

Nicole nearly tripped as she reached for the towel. His brazen appraisal of her nakedness had embarrassed and unsettled her.

A knock at the door interrupted Alex's perusal. As he turned to answer it, Nicole dropped the towel and quickly slipped into her gown. Her graceful fingers dispatched the buttons with ease, and she fastened them up to the high neckline. She felt much better as she turned to face Alex. It was bad enough when she was completely clothed, but to be perfectly naked in front of Alex was totally intimidating.

Nicole studied him as he directed the maid into the room. He baffled her. One moment he brutally berated her

with questions whose answers he would not accept, and the next he was the soul of tenderness as he soothed her tears. One moment he was the perfect gentleman; the next he appeared to rape her with his eyes. What kind of man was Alex Chandler? Nicole asked herself as the maid set their dinner on the table and silently left the room.

Nicole's apprehension was clearly visible in her eyes when Alex turned his attention back to her. She expected another outburst, but he said pleasantly, "Shall we eat? The steak and potatoes look delicious after Emma's cold biscuits." Alex smiled as he gallantly pulled out the chair for Nicole to be seated.

Nicole did not hesitate. She was ravenous after their day-long ride. She kept her eyes lowered as she took her seat and began to eat. She didn't want Alex to see the confusion he'd caused. And, too, she was afraid to break the peace between them at the moment.

The quiet time gave Alex a chance to study the woman who sat across from him. The scent of jasmine wafted toward him to tease and arouse his desire. He watched her graceful movements as she cut the steak and bit with even white teeth into the meat. Delicately she blotted her full pink lips with the napkin. She sipped the hot coffee, and her small pink tongue retrieved a stray droplet from her tempting lips.

Alex closed his eyes briefly as he ordered his body not to respond. Yet he knew it was useless. His response to Nicole's beauty was as natural as breathing. Keeping his eyes away from his dinner partner, Alex finished his meal quickly and decided a cold bath would help eliminate what his mind could not. Rising from his chair, Alex pulled off his shirt as he said, "I believe I will also have a bath."

Startled by his sudden announcement, Nicole stared in

shock as he disrobed before her. She tried to draw her eyes away from his hard masculine body but found herself mesmerized by it. Alex noted her interest and casually posed to show his body to the best advantage. He smiled as he watched her dark blue gaze travel over his physique as if she'd just realized the difference between men and women. He saw the wonder in her eyes as they scanned the width of his shoulders and chest. They lingered briefly on the black mat of hair that covered his chest before her gaze slowly followed the narrowing hairline down to his flat stomach. She noted the trimness of his hips and the dark hair that covered his firmly muscled thighs. Alex turned to face Nicole as her gaze began to travel upward once more. At that precise moment Nicole saw his manhood nestled against the dark curls, and she gasped and quickly shifted her gaze in another direction.

Alex could contain his amusement no longer and chuckled at her embarrassment. Nicole heard his mirth and her discomfort grew. She heard the water splash as Alex settled his large frame into the wooden tub. He began to hum a tune as he lathered his dark hair, and Nicole decided that it was time for her to seek her bed. She had been caught spying on Alex's privacy and did not feel like facing him after his bath. Yet before she reached the large four-poster bed, Alex asked, "Nicole, don't you remember anything between us?"

Mortified, Nicole answered, "No," as she quickly climbed between the muslin sheets and covered her hot face. Alex chuckled again as he rinsed the soap from his body and stepped from the tub. He dried himself slowly and then climbed into the bed.

A smile tugged at Alex's lips when he saw the sheet quiver as his weight rested on the bed. Gently, he pulled the sheet from Nicole, his eyes caressing her flawless

beauty as her dark lashes fluttered upward, to reveal an apprehensive gaze. Slowly Alex leaned forward, his lips only inches from hers. "Then let me help you remember." Sensuously, Alex captured Nicole's soft, trembling mouth.

Nicole jerked her lips free of Alex's searing kiss and tried to slide away from his sinewy, naked body. She did not like the sensations his touch aroused. Her lips tingled and a slow, tantalizing warmth seemed to have invaded her body. She fought to control her emotions. "Alex, please," she pleaded. "I don't remember anything."

Alex's dark brown eyes became soft with passion, and his voice was husky as he said, "Let me help you remember, Nicole. I won't hurt you." His long bronzed fingers gently traced their way down Nicole's smooth cheek as he gazed into the very depths of her. Alex's breathing had grown heavy as his desire increased. He pulled her against his hungry body, his hands seeking and finding the hooks to her gown. They worked swiftly and Nicole was soon naked. In the brief moment when Alex's lips had captured Nicole's, he had known he had to possess her. He had been without a woman too long, and the lies she'd told caused him no guilt. Alex's body demanded a release, and nothing could dissuade it from the path of fulfillment.

Once more Nicole tried to suppress the sparks of fire Alex aroused with his touch. She pushed at his chest. "No," she said.

Nicole's efforts did not hinder Alex's hands as he caressed her firm breasts. The deep rose nipples hardened in response. It was the natural primeval reaction of female to male, yet Alex let it confirm his suspicion of Nicole and cover his own transgression. "But you are my wife, Nicole," he murmured. She was no innocent, and the lie would harm no one. It would be a pleasant interlude for them both,

Alex assured his conscience as he let his lips travel down her slender neck to her smooth shoulder.

The feel of her flesh beneath his lips soon forced all other thought from his mind. He nibbled her soft shoulder and soon found the alabaster mounds he desired. Alex suckled her breasts as his tongue slowly circled their dark nipples. His hands traced a languid path down her back to her firm buttocks.

Nicole's breathing became heavy, and she turned her head restlessly against the pillow as she tried to fight the flames his touch ignited. She tried to push his head from her breasts, but the sensations his lips aroused as he greedily devoured her flesh brought forth a moan from deep within her. Nicole's arms involuntarily slid about his neck to press him closer.

Alex felt Nicole's surrender and raised himself to look down into her passion-filled eyes. She moaned, disappointed, as he released her. Alex smiled at her reaction and then captured her lips once more. Nicole returned his kiss with ardor as her own tongue daringly explored Alex's demanding mouth.

Alex's lips journeyed over her body again, igniting, searing her flesh, his tongue circling, his hands inviting, his fingers gently probing, until Nicole's thighs spread to him, her hips moving sensually, his touch unleashing a fiery furor that reached the very core of her desire. His lips and tongue teased and titillated, nibbled and taunted, every inch of her, now awakened to the physical sensations he evoked.

Nicole could not contain the moan of pleasure that surged through her as Alex raised her hips to his devouring lips. Alex's own moan of passion escaped as he savored the sweetness of her soft flesh. His tongue sought out the

dark sheath of love, this new assault eliciting a response so intense that Nicole cried out, "Alex, please take me."

Alex released her hips with regret and looked at Nicole's passion-filled face. Her raven hair was spread about her ivory body, her cheeks were flushed and her eyes partially hidden by her thick, black lashes, yet he could see the desire in them. He spread her thighs wide, as his lips traveled back to her waiting mouth.

Alex had controlled his own passion while trying to arouse Nicole, but his body now demanded release. His manhood longed to feel the moist warmth of her. Alex could contain himself no longer and thrust deeply within Nicole until, with a shock, he tore away the small obstruction.

Nicole cried out and clawed at Alex's back in an effort to escape. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and Alex stopped all movement. His face registered amazement, and he closed his eyes briefly to shield himself from Nicole's expression. My God! What have I done! his mind shouted as his body once more began to react to her.

Alex smoothed back Nicole's dark curls from her damp forehead as he began to move slowly within her. It was too late to change anything, and his body demanded release. "Hush, love, it will give you pleasure. Relax and let me love you."

Nicole wiped away her tears as she gazed up into his tender eyes. A small thrill of pleasure had begun to build deep within her. She touched Alex's face and then pulled him to her as the fire consumed her once more. Every nerve in her body tingled, and as his thrusts became deeper, Nicole moved with him, locking her legs about him so she might feel him deep within her. Alex trembled with her response and they moved as one, climbing peaks

of ecstasy until they reached the summit simultaneously, her body arching against his in her rapture.

Alex threw back his head and laughed as he listened to Nicole's cry of pleasure, and his passion exploded within her.

Nicole and Alex lay quietly together for a long while, their bodies satisfied and relaxed. All was peaceful when Nicole suddenly opened her eyes wide in shock as she remembered her pain. Questions flooded her mind.

Nicole felt that she had played the fool as she sat up and looked at Alex's contented face. "Alex?" she queried. After a moment of silence, Alex opened his eyes and stared up at her. "What is it, my love?" he said, breathing a regretful sigh. He knew her questions before they came to her passion-bruised lips. Alex had been dreading them.

"We'd never made love, had we?" Nicole asked. Alex hesitated briefly before he shook his head. Nicole bit her lip and closed her eyes to shut out the sight of the deceitful man. She gritted her teeth as her rage grew. The thought of his insidious lies made her nauseated. "Then how could we have been man and wife? You tricked me! We're not married. You knew I couldn't remember anything and used that knowledge as an easy way to get me into your bed. Your lies were very convenient, weren't they? Answer me, damn you!"

Alex rubbed his hand across his face and through his hair. He sat up. "No, they were not lies, Nicole. You are my wife, but our marriage was never consummated. You disappeared before we had a chance." Alex knew his stratagem was working as he saw the look of doubt cross Nicole's flushed face. He continued smoothly, artfully beguiling Nicole with his soft words. "We argued on our wedding night and you simply walked out of the hotel and were gone before I could do anything about it."

NICOLE LA BELLE

Alex gently cupped her face within his hands and looked into her deep blue eyes. "My love, don't be angry. You are my wife, and if you don't believe me, we can be married again before we go downriver. Does that ease your mind?"

Nicole's anxiety was soothed by Alex's words, but she could not remove the doubt that nagged at her. She could not remember her first wedding and realized that Alex's suggestion would be the only answer. They would be married again. Nicole smiled as she snuggled close to Alex and let her fingers curl in the matted hair on his chest. "All right, Alex. We will be married again. At least I will remember this one."

Alex was dumbfounded by this turn of events, but his mind was quickly turned away from the dilemma in which he had placed himself. Nicole's slender arms encircled his neck and pulled his head down to meet her lips. Her ripe young body pressed enticingly against him until all rational thought was gone and they made love once more.

Afterward, as Nicole slept in his arms, his mind returned to their earlier conversation. What had he gotten himself into? He had not meant to say that he would marry Nicole. The words seemed to have come of their own free will. Now, to Alex's amazement, he found that he was going to marry the girl. He didn't trust her—he suspected her of murder—yet she would be his wife. The predicament was of his own creation, but he had never expected Nicole to accept his offer.

Alex glanced down at the dark head that rested so peacefully on his shoulder. He quickly turned his head away as he realized that the sight of her luscious body made his own respond instantly. In confusion Alex laid one arm over his eyes as he tried to make sense of their situation.

A small spark of happiness flamed within Alex, and he smiled to himself. This passionate creature will be mine forever. His suspicions were deeply rooted against Nicole, but after tonight he did not believe he could do without her. Her body beckoned him. Alex realized that he was defenseless against it.

He decided that he would go through with the ceremony. In the future if he proved his suspicions correct, he would deal with it then. And he hoped that, at that time he would be tired of her and could deal out the punishment her duplicity merited.

Alex pulled Nicole's naked body close against his own and wrapped his arms about her as he inhaled the sweet aroma she exuded. This might not be too bad after all, he thought as he drifted off to sleep.



CHAPTER 11

The marriage ceremony that united Nicole Sentelle and Alexander Chandler III was held in the Cottersville trading post and officiated over by a visiting priest. For Nicole, the words were no less binding, the place no less grand, than if she and Alex had been in the sacred sanctuary of Notre Dame. All of her worries had been expelled, and she looked forward to a life with Alex as her husband. The service completed, the two lovers returned quickly to the inn.

They walked hand in hand up the stairs, and when they reached their room, Alex swept Nicole into his arms as he carried her over the threshold. He ordered champagne to celebrate the event but had to settle for a cheap homemade wine. Cottersville was, after all, a small river town and could not boast luxuries of any sort—though this did not by any means spoil the festive mood between them. They ate their food with relish and drank the cheap wine as though it had been of the vintage grapes of kings. Afterward they made love until the early-morning hours. As the

dawn sky lightened from lavender to blue the lovers slept entwined in each other's arms.

Their sensual interlude lasted for two weeks, during which time Nicole and Alex blotted out all but each other. During this time both fell deeply in love. Nicole delighted in her feelings toward Alex, but he refused conscious admittance to any such emotion. He felt desire for Nicole and assured himself that that desire was no more than physical attraction.

The paddle wheeler's whistle shrilled through the misty morning air as Alex and Nicole stood on the top deck and watched Cottersville disappear in the distance. Nicole glanced up at the man she had married and squeezed his arm, wishing for the feel of his taut skin instead of the suede of his jacket. He smiled at her and asked what seemed a superfluous question, unable himself to put into words the fullness he felt. "Are you happy?"

Nicole could only nod her answer. She could not express, either, the totality of her feelings for Alex. "I love you,"—the words seemed so inadequate when her entire being glowed with the emotions he aroused within her heart. She wanted all their days to be as happy as the past weeks but knew that a short time was all that was left to them. They would soon reach New Orleans and once more join society. Nicole's dark blue gaze lingered on the receding shoreline as the steamboat traveled into the midstream current. She sensed that their life would never be as peaceful as it had been at the little inn in Cottersville.

Alex put his arm about Nicole's shoulder and pulled her close as he whispered devilishly, "Don't you think you have seen enough of the scenery, madam? Wouldn't it be nice to retire to our cabin for a little rest? It's exhausting to look at so much beauty."

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Nicole smiled up at her husband. She blushed slightly when she realized that his compliment was for her and not the landscape. Her white-gloved hand brushed back a dark curl that the soft river breeze blew across his forehead and then caressed his smooth-shaven cheek. Nicole's eyes mirrored her love as she said, "I think that's a wonderful idea." Alex hugged her close as he laughed and led the way to their cabin. The remaining days aboard the riverboat were spent in the same manner. Each morning they strolled about the deck and then returned to their cabin to make love.

Nicole and Alex had an insatiable appetite, one for the other. They appeared perfectly matched, as though nature had intended them for each other. But in the dark night, as Nicole lay asleep in his arms, Alex could not rid himself of the ghosts of the past. Nor could Nicole forget in their quiet moments Sentelle's epithet. "Murderer." The word would flash through her mind to chill her very soul. She feared that the happiness she now felt would end the moment Alex even suspected her capable of such violence. If he turned from her, she could not bear it. She had to protect the fragile love that had grown between them. Besides, she couldn't have done such a thing. Even though she had no memory of the past, Nicole felt herself incapable of murder. Still the thought would come, so real and fearsome that it could only be erased in the warmth of Alex's embrace.

They arrived at New Orleans on an oppressively hot day. The humidity was high, even in the late evening, as the riverboat docked at the wharf. Alex's mood was not improved by the discomfort he felt. They were almost home, and he didn't know how to deal with what he had done. He had made Nicole his wife and still meant to

prove her a murderer. He could face neither the horror or the consequences such proof would bring nor his own conflicted feelings toward her. The long hours on the *River Queen* and in the inn were too fresh in his mind.

Alex decided, finally, that he would settle Nicole in his house on Rampart Street and resume his normal routine. No one would think to question his actions, since it was customary for a man to keep his mistress in her own domain. If he proved his suspicions correct, then little would be said when he turned Nicole over to the authorities. If evidence showed her to be innocent, he could then introduce her into New Orleans society without anyone ever knowing that he had kept her on Rampart Street. The two classes did not mix, and Nicole would not be harmed by gossip.

With that settled, he quickly escorted Nicole from the *River Queen* before anyone had a chance to recognize her. It was dusk, and he ordered the driver of the hired carriage to take them to Rampart Street. Alex used the excuse of Nicole's pale cheeks to still her complaints that they passed too quickly for her to see the city. He assured her that he would give her a tour of New Orleans just as soon as he had his business affairs in order. Nicole did not argue. She had not been feeling quite well, she assumed because of the heat, but she suspected other causes. Her monthly flow had been due several days earlier. Nicole's menses had always been like clockwork as far as she could remember. She wanted to confirm her suspicions before she told Alex that he was to be a father.

The soft late September breeze cooled the drawing room as it ruffled the thin white lace curtains. Nicole was lonely as she sat and stitched a tiny garment by the light of the crystal lamp. So many things had changed since they

returned to New Orleans. Alex was no longer the attentive lover he had been. He had taken up his daily routine as if Nicole did not exist, and his actions puzzled her. Of late Alex had been staying at his shipping offices until all hours of the night. On some nights when he returned to the house on Rampart Street, Alex was as he had been on board the *River Queen*. Yet on other nights he drank to excess and watched Nicole's every move in brooding silence. Alex never took her out for the evening or for the tour of the city he had promised. However, he was very generous to her. He hired a seamstress to furnish Nicole with an expensive wardrobe and was always bringing small gifts that arrived on his ships from all over the world.

The linen Nicole now sewed had come from France, as had the lace with which she decorated the small garment. Nicole held up the gown to see if the hem was straight. Laying it down, she threaded another needle so she might attach the delicate lace to the neckline, only to prick her finger. She realized that her mind had been not on the task before her but engaged, as it so often was, with thoughts about Alex's attitude toward her. How could she tell him of her condition when his behavior was so erratic and there seemed no possible opening to discuss such a momentous event. She was now afraid that the baby would cause an even greater rift between them. Alex had never spoken of a desire for children. Nicole staunched her tears and returned her concentration to her sewing.

Nicole did not hear Alex enter the room as she bent over the soft linen to catch the fragile lace with her needle. She chewed her lower lip nervously as her mind sought an answer to the dilemma in which she had placed herself for not speaking of their child sooner. Alex was beside her before she had time to hide the tiny object in her hand.

Alex heard her quick intake of breath and saw the

apprehension in her blue eyes as she tried to stuff the garment down beside the chair. Alex smiled as he bent and pulled the gown from her trembling hand. "What have we here?" Alex queried as he looked at the tiny object. He paled as he realized what it meant. This was the one thing he had not counted on happening in their relationship.

The smile that had come to Nicole's lips at the sight of her husband disappeared when she saw the reaction to the gown. Alex looked at her and then back to the soft material in his hand.

"Are you pregnant?" he said as he stared down at her, all emotion wiped from his face.

"Yes," she whispered as the tears brimmed in her eyes. Nicole bit her lower lip as she slowly reached out and took the tiny gown from Alex's frozen fingers. She kept her eyes lowered as she placed the garment into her sewing basket. She did not look at him as he asked, "How long have you known?"

"About a month. I realized it right after our arrival, but I didn't want to say anything until I was sure."

Alex tried to regain his composure as he turned from Nicole and poured himself a whiskey from the liquor cabinet. He swallowed the burning liquid in one gulp. Alex coughed as its fire seared his insides and helped to alleviate some of his distress.

Pouring himself another drink, Alex turned once more to his wife. They had been married for only a month and a half and now would be parents. He felt trapped as much by fate as by his own irresponsible actions.

Alex had been trying, through New Orleans society, to draw himself away from Nicole, to break the hold she had on him. He continued his investigation of her but had not found any evidence to back up his claim of her guilt. His

only hope was to force a confession from her, but that would be impossible now. She was to have his child.

Alex shook his head as he thought of his mother. How could he ever explain it to her? He had as yet to inform her of his marriage to Nicole, much less the fact that she was going to make him a father. Damn, he thought. What am I to do? The wench holds my heart on a string as well as my babe in her belly.

Nicole tentatively glanced up at her husband, but when she saw the angry expression on his face, she quickly lowered her eyes again. "I'm sorry." Her words were barely audible, yet they made Alex instantly contrite. He quickly crossed the room and took her fragile face in his hands, forcing her to look at him. "There's no need to be sorry. It was just a shock to hear I am to be a father."

Nicole's deep blue eyes sparkled as hope flared within her. "Then you are not angry? You do want children?"

Alex smiled down at his beautiful wife. All other thoughts were pushed from his mind. Her beauty had the power to engulf his soul, and he kissed the gentle swell of her lips.

"Angry? No, I'm not angry with you, my love. Who would not want to have children with you?" Alex pulled Nicole to her feet and held her within his embrace. "I am happy, Nicole. I realize now that no matter what has happened in the past, I cannot do without you. I love you." As Alex spoke he knew his words to be truth. It would take time to erase the past from his memory, but he would try. He would allay the suspicions against Nicole for their sake as well as the child's.

Nicole hugged her husband and kissed him. "I'm so glad. I thought you didn't want children, and I was so frightened it would make you angry. Now everything is perfect." She hugged Alex again. "I love you so much."

Alex patted Nicole playfully on the rump as he said,

"Well, the day after tomorrow, my dear, we are going to let you meet the child's grandmother. It's about time you got out of this house. I think you will enjoy living at Live Oak."

"Live Oak. Is that your plantation?"

Mistrust again filled him, and he searched Nicole's face for any hint of recognition in the name. He found none, and Alex pushed his doubts to the back of his mind as he held Nicole close. "Yes, it is our plantation now, Nicole. Kensington adjoins it, and that is where my mother lives. We will go directly to Live Oak and then I shall inform mother that she's to be a grandmother."

"Alex, I would like to meet your mother. Can't I go with you?"

Alex shook his head. "No, my love. That would be too much for you. I will bring mother back to Live Oak for a visit. You must take care of yourself now that you are to be a mother," Alex said as he lightly kissed her brow.

Alex knew that he could not tell Nicole his true reasons for such an arrangement. He had to explain the recent events to his mother so she would not make the mistake of telling Nicole everything she knew. Alex knew his mother well. He expected her rage. She had neither trusted nor liked Nicole from the first. He could easily picture Emily Chandler rushing to Live Oak to wreak vengeance upon Nicole.

If he could make Emily understand his actions, then she would go along with whatever he did. She would not be happy about the baby, but Emily would do nothing to harm one of her own blood. The baby was a Chandler, no matter what its mother had done in the past. It would be protected at all cost.

Alex would send a messenger to Live Oak the first thing tomorrow morning. He had to prepare the servants for

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Nicole's return. They must never let her know that she had been to the plantation before. As long as she carried the Chandler heir, Nicole's past was of no consequence. With her arrival at Live Oak, Nicole was only Mrs. Alex Chandler and the mother of his child.

Alex smiled as he led his wife up the stairs to their comfortable bedroom. Nicole bubbled with laughter as he swung her off her feet and carried her to the high cherry tester bed. He laid her gently upon the down mattress and spread her dark hair across the silk pillows and removed the pins.

Nicole was beautiful. Her blue velvet eyes were already soft and glowing with passion as Alex captured her lips with his own. Nicole's arms slid about his neck and pulled him to her. Her long, slender fingers traced a slow, tantalizing path down his chest as she unbuttoned his shirt. She kissed his throat and nibbled at his ear. Her actions produced a groan of pleasure deep within Alex's chest. Nicole could feel his rapid heartbeat against her breast as he slid the gown from her shoulders, and as the ivory mounds were exposed to his gaze, Alex sighed. "Will I never tire of your beauty, my love?" He slid the gown down over her hips and hastily removed his own garments.

Alex lay on his back and pulled Nicole's naked body on top of his own. His hands sought her breasts and cupped the soft flesh as his thumbs teased her nipples until they stood pointed and hard. Alex's slightest touch inflamed Nicole's passion, and her raven hair cascaded about them as she bent to his seeking lips.

Nicole wanted to return the pleasure Alex gave her. She explored his masculine body freely, seeking out the most sensitive areas with her touch. She kissed his chest and slowly let her lips travel down to his firm belly. She heard his gasp of pleasure as her hand found his aroused manhood.

Gently, Nicole caressed that part of him that brought forth in her such ecstasy. She enjoyed the feel of its soft, smooth flesh beneath her fingers. Her own breathing was becoming heavier as she teasingly let her lips creep nearer. She kissed Alex's inner thigh, and Nicole heard him groan when her lips found their desire.

Nicole laughed softly as Alex, unable to bear the sweet torment another second, quickly threw her on her back and mounted her. He thrust deeply within her soft flesh, touching the core of her existence. She drew him closer and closer still until she felt herself part of him. And as he reached the apex of his desire, her own body quivered with rapture.

As Alex's breathing returned to normal, he pulled Nicole into his arms and tenderly kissed her forehead. "No, I will never tire of you, my darling. No other woman could carry me to such heights of joy."

Nicole snuggled against Alex's lean frame, and as she drifted off to sleep she whispered, "I'm glad."

In the warm glow of the candlelight Alex watched his wife sleep. Her stomach soon would round with their child, and she'd be even lovelier, he was sure, as she blossomed with motherhood. His gaze lingered on her peaceful face. What if you are a murderer? What will I do then? I won't be able to live with you, and I know I won't be able to live without you. Nicole? Nicole? What have you done to me? Alex wrapped his arms about Nicole's sleeping form and pulled her tightly against him. He tried to expunge the ghosts that haunted him, but they persisted. Finally, exhausted, he slept.

Nicole awoke with a start, a cry in her throat, the nightmare of Sentelle's face fading. Her hand sought Alex, but she saw, through strands of hair that fell over her face, that his side of the bed was empty. She felt an answering

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emptiness inside her. Even when his voice came from across the room, it didn't really help. She needed him close, his arms encircling her with warmth and protection. Noting that Alex was already dressed to leave for his office, she forced a smile to her lips.

"Nothing is wrong," she said in answer to his question. "I just had a bad dream."

"Well, sleepyhead, you had better get up and get dressed if you want to go with me today. It's such a lovely day, I thought you might want to do some more shopping before we go to Live Oak tomorrow."

"Oh, Alex, do you mean it?" she asked, and she quickly scrambled from the bed and began to dig through the armoire for something to wear. She was like a child, delighted with the prospect of a treat, and Alex's conscience nagged at him. He'd been so unfair to have kept her a virtual prisoner in this house.

In her excitement, Nicole could not wait for the maid to help her dress. She slipped a pale yellow gown over her tousled head and turned to have Alex do the hooks. He kissed her lightly on the nape of her neck as she pulled her hair up so it would not become tangled in the process. "You had better hurry, my love, before I change my mind and undo what I have just done." Alex chuckled.

Nicole stepped away from his questing touch and said, "Oh, no. I wouldn't miss today for anything. Not even for your lustful ways, Alex Chandler."

Alex watched as Nicole began to brush the tangles from her thick hair. The light that filtered through the window gave the silken mass a blue tint that matched and enhanced the color of her eyes. Nicole's slender fingers wound the heavy burden neatly into a chignon and then pulled several curls over her ears to dangle enticingly.

As Nicole finished her coiffure, Alex pulled a small

black box from his pocket. "I meant to give you these last night, but it seems I became more interested in other things."

Alex opened the box and removed a strand of pearls. He kissed the top of Nicole's head as he fastened them about her ivory throat. "This is your wedding gift. Wear it with my love."

Alex watched Nicole's expression in the mirror as his hand caressed her smooth, white shoulder. Her eyes brimmed with tears and her lips trembled as she smiled at him. "I love you, Alex," she finally managed, her voice tight with emotion.

Slowly Alex's hand caressed her cheek and brushed away a tear. "None of those, now, or your face will be ruined and you won't be able to go out. Are you ready?"

Nicole wiped at her eyes and laughed as she turned to her husband's waiting arms. "Yes, I'm ready."

"Well, people may laugh when they see my wife traipsing about in her bare feet." Alex laughed as he looked down and saw her dainty toes peaking from beneath her gown.

Nicole blushed as she realized that she had forgotten her slippers in her haste. Quickly she found a soft yellow pair to match her gown and slipped them on. "Now I am ready, sir." She giggled.

Alex tapped his gold pocket watch and smiled. "It's about time, my little hoyden."

Happily, Alex escorted Nicole from the house to his open carriage. He seated her on the red velvet seat and took the reins. Their first stop of the day was at the Cafe du Pont, where they enjoyed a breakfast of hot croissants and pungent coffee, flavored the Louisiana way, with chicory and warm milk. From there Alex took Nicole through the Vieux Carré. They stopped on Royal Street so that

Nicole could see the shops there. In them she found all her heart could desire, goods from all over the world, a good many by way of Alex's own shipping company. Alex was surprised to find that he was enjoying himself just watching the delight that came to Nicole's face when she found still another bauble to purchase. Soon he found his arms loaded with packages and decided it was time to tear Nicole from the day's enchantment.

Alex ushered Nicole gently back to their carriage and resumed their tour of the city. From Royal Street they traveled to Jackson Square, where Alex stopped the carriage in front of St. Louis Cathedral. Instinctively, Nicole sensed his intentions and covered her hair with the lace shawl as Alex helped her from the carriage. No words were spoken as the two made their way into the hallowed building. Each knelt before the altar and prayed for the child Nicole carried.

When they once more stepped from the shadows of the cathedral, Nicole felt refreshed and ready to face whatever life brought her way. For the present, Nicole's ghost had been laid to rest.

As the day wore on, Nicole and Alex toured the French market and enjoyed lunch at a sidewalk cafe. They dined on fresh shrimp lightly sautéed in butter and served over rice. For dessert they ate fresh strawberries glazed with sugar.

The last stop of their day-long excursion was near the waterfront at Alex's office. Alex was proud of the business he'd built and wanted Nicole to see his accomplishment. He showed her the warehouses stacked with goods from foreign ports. He also guided her through the hot, reeking rooms where the pelts were stored until they could be sent to furriers abroad. Nicole saw Alex's enthusiasm as he displayed his merchandise and tried to ask knowledgeable

questions even though she understood little of how the business worked. She tried to hide her fatigue, but Alex noted the shadows under her eyes and her pale face. He became solicitous of her welfare and escorted her back to their carriage.

"I should not have exhausted you with all of this," he said as he waved his hand in the direction of the warehouse, "but I wanted you to share everything with me, Nicole, I wanted you to see what our child will inherit some day."

After the long day, Alex's cheek was lightly shadowed by his beard. Nicole placed her hand against it lovingly as she gazed up into his worried eyes. "And I love you for it. I want to share your life in every way, Alex."

Alex squeezed Nicole's hand and then lifted her into the carriage. "I know you do. Now, wait here for a moment while I talk with Mr. Watt, my head clerk. I need to give him instructions before we leave for Live Oak. I won't be long."

"Take your time, Alex. I'll sit here and enjoy the sight of all the ships and the river."

Alex kissed her hand and returned to his office. Nicole adjusted her skirt about her and settled back to enjoy the scenery. Her eyes scanned the quay; intrigued by the number of ships from all over the world. They brought silks and tea from the Orient, fine lace from France, wool from England, rum and sugar from the islands. As she looked at the fine masted vessels, Nicole could understand Alex's love of his trade.

Nicole shifted on the velvet seat. Alex was taking longer than he expected, and she was beginning to feel uncomfortable. A chill of fear crept up her neck as she suddenly sensed someone watching her. Her eyes scanned the nearby building and came to rest on a lone figure leaning casually against the wall in the alley. His features

were in the shadows, yet Nicole recognized him instantly. It was John Sentelle.

Nicole quickly averted her gaze in hopes that her imagination was playing tricks on her. Her hands gripped the edge of the seat as she furtively glanced in his direction again. He was still there. Sentelle bowed mockingly to her and slowly turned and walked down the alley.

Nicole was physically shaken by the sight of the man. She jumped nervously as Alex climbed into the carriage. He saw her startled expression and said, "I'm sorry if I frightened you. I did not mean to take so long, but Mr. Watt had several shipping orders that I had to read and sign before I left town. Are you ready to return home?"

Nicole forced a smile to her lips and hid her trembling hands within the folds of her skirt. "Yes. I am exhausted."

Alex put his arm about her and pulled her close. Nicole welcomed the security of his embrace and leaned her head against his shoulder. Wearily she closed her eyes and tried to put the sight of John Sentelle from her mind. It was impossible. He had found her and her fear had returned. It had been only hours since she had prayed in the St. Louis Cathedral and felt sure she had rid herself of the demons that followed her. Now she had seen one of them and she trembled.

Alex felt Nicole shudder and glanced anxiously down at her face. He'd let her overdo. Alex gave himself a mental kick as he slapped the reins of the horses. In his effort to make up for his previous behavior he had tried to show Nicole everything in one day. He realized that he would have to be more cautious in the future. He wanted nothing to jeopardize the life of his heir.



CHAPTER 12

"*How could you do such a thing, Alex?*" Emily Chandler stormed. "You leave Kensington in search of the baggage who murdered your uncle and return married to her. Now to top off this ridiculous charade, you tell me that I am to become a grandmother! Have you lost your senses, Alex? The girl is nothing but swamp trash. Are you even sure the child she carries is yours and not that of some trapper she met while she was with Sentelle?"

He'd felt like a schoolboy, his mother reprimanding him for some lapse of form, but now she'd gone too far. "The child is mine. I assure you! Nicole had never been with a man before. Had I known that, I would not now be in this position. But it may work out for the best."

Exasperated, Emily shook her head. "Work out for the best? You *are* mad! How on earth can anything work out with that woman resting calmly at Live Oak after what she's done?"

Alex had no real interest in Live Oak for himself, but he

knew only too well how desperately Emily wanted the plantation for the Chandlers.

"If you would only calm yourself and let me explain, you will see that I'm right. Of course, you'll have to agree to keep everything to yourself. Nicole must never learn our real intention."

At this moment Emily wanted nothing more than to shake her offspring for his stupidity, but she decided, finally, to hear him out. "All right, Alex, explain yourself, if you can. I'll try to understand, though I'd like nothing better than to go to Live Oak and throw that swamp trash back into the slime from which she's come."

"I think you'll agree with the actions that I have taken, once you hear my reasons. I did not mean for things to turn out this way, but now that they have, I think they could not be better. Don't you see that I now control Live Oak? As Nicole's husband, the property becomes partly mine."

Alex realized that what he'd said was not true. According to law, property inherited by a woman belonged solely to that woman, as he understood it. He had an idea that there was some other legal stipulation, but that really wasn't an issue. For himself, he had little interest in Live Oak. He had more than enough to keep him busy, between Kensington and his own shipping lines. But if Emily was convinced by what he said, that was all he wanted or cared about for now.

She appeared mollified on that issue only to pursue another. "How can you prove that she killed Quinton when you are married to the woman?"

Alex shrugged. "It won't be easy. The only thing she can be accused of is running away from Live Oak on the night the crime was committed. That in itself proves her guilty of nothing."

Emily's rage resurfaced as her son's face revealed more feeling toward Nicole than his words conveyed. Was he in love with the woman as Quinton had been? "Alex, is there no way that you can force a confession from her? You do have her all to yourself. No one need ever know. Or is there something that you are keeping from me? Do you care for this woman?"

Alex shifted his gaze from his mother and flushed. "Mother, she doesn't remember anything. How else would I have been able to say we were married?" He rose from the chair and began his own nervous pacing. How could he tell her that he had thought of using violence when they'd first left the Baileys but could not bring himself to hurt the woman he'd come to love, despite his suspicions about her? After a moment of silence, Alex raised his eyes to meet his mother's. She was shaken by what she saw there. The agony of the conflict he felt was plainly written on his face.

"Alex," she said softly, "Quinton was like a father to you."

"I've tried to tell myself the same thing, Mother. But I have no proof of Nicole's treachery. If only there had been some evidence, then I could have been at peace with myself. Now she's carrying my child, so I must, at least until it's born, put suspicion aside."

Emily came to her son's side and hugged him. "Alex, you *will* find the truth. We can wait, if that is your wish, but if she did murder Quinton, it is our duty to see her punished. Cecila was my sister and he was her husband. It is our duty to find the culprit."

"I know you are right. We need the truth for all of our sakes." Alex could not tell his mother that if the truth led to Nicole's guilt, it would probably tear him apart. He loved her, but he would do what was necessary.

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Emily knew that he'd do the right thing. Wasn't he her son? She patted his cheek affectionately. "Now, shall we go and meet your new bride? I will play the part of the happy grandmother for you."

Nicole stretched and smiled as she awoke and looked about the room. She'd been exhausted from the journey to Live Oak. Alex had been right in his assumption that she would not be up to visiting Kensington on the day of their arrival.

Nicole sat up on the high tester with its sheer mosquito netting. She took the silver-backed brush from the nightstand and leaned back against the satin pillows to brush the tangles from her hair. She felt relaxed and at home. A strange feeling of belonging had come over her from the moment they approached the great white house, and she could almost hear the words, "Welcome home," as the breeze traveled through the branches of the huge live oaks along the drive. She did not understand her feelings, yet in the deep recesses of her mind she felt a kinship with this place.

"Has Alex brought me here before?" she asked herself as she climbed from the bed and slipped on an afternoon gown made of a soft light muslin. Nicole bent to retrieve her slippers from under the bed, and as she did so a brief ache throbbed in her temples. She leaned against the bed and rubbed her forehead with the tips of her fingers. In that instant a flash of memory occurred and she saw the long, Spanish moss-draped drive. Nicole tried to remember more, but the pain in her head increased. Weakly, she made her way to the chair near the window and sat down. She had been here before, but when? She pushed hard, trying to glimpse the shadows that wafted about in her mind, but it was useless. Massaging her aching temples to relieve the increasing pain, Nicole closed her eyes and laid

her head back against the chair. As she began to relax, another vision came to her, a vision of darkness and of herself riding—nothing more.

She sensed that something terrible had happened. *You are a murderer.* Sentelle's words swam in her head. Nicole shivered and sat bolt upright. Her eyes flew open, and she wrapped her arms about herself. She wished for Alex to return. She needed his comforting arms about her.

Nicole glanced briefly at her reflection in the full-length gilt-edged mirror. Her face was pale; even her lips were deadly white. It would not do to let Alex find her looking as if she had seen a ghost, even if she had come very close to doing that very thing. She pinched her cheeks and bit her lips to bring color to them. Shaking her head to ward off the past, Nicole quickly found her elusive slippers and left the room. She hoped as she closed the door that she was once more shutting away the memories which made her afraid.

As Nicole descended the stairs, she heard the carriage come to a stop at the door. She hurried forward but stopped in the shadow of the doorway as she watched Alex help the beautiful lady from the vehicle. As the woman raised her face in the direction of the house, Nicole saw the resemblance between mother and son. Both had square, determined jaws, aquiline noses, and full lips. Emily's features were softened by her femininity, but her character could be read in the set of her chin and the look in her eyes.

Nicole's head throbbed, and she leaned against the door, a sense of *déjà vu* filling her as she watched the two come up the walk. She realized that she had seen the woman before. But of course, *I have* met Mrs. Chandler. Alex is her son and we would have become acquainted before the first wedding.

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Alex noted Nicole's pallor when she greeted them as he and Emily entered the house. He also noticed the slight tremble in her hands as she extended them in welcome to his mother. "Mother, you already know Nicole, but I'm afraid she doesn't remember your meeting."

Emily smiled coolly at Nicole and took her hand within her own to acknowledge Alex's formal introduction. "Nicole, it's so nice to have you back with us again—and with such good news! Alex has already told me that I am to be a grandmother."

Nicole blushed as she demurely looked at the older woman. "Thank you, madam, for your kind words. I'm pleased to know that you're as happy about our child as we are."

Emily arched her brow and laughed, a brittle sound. "Pleased is not the word for it, my dear."

Aware of the angry glint in Emily's eyes as she looked from him to Nicole, Alex became increasingly wary about what she'd say next. He escorted her to a chair and sat down beside Nicole on the striped silk sofa and, in an attempt to move the conversation along positive lines, said, "Mother is pleased about how things have worked out for us, aren't you, Mother?"

"Yes, Alex, I think everything has worked out beautifully. However, as we rode over here I was thinking about the child's future. It is never too soon to make plans." Emily smiled sweetly at her son, not missing the look of surprise on his face, nor the protective gesture as he put his arm around Nicole's shoulder.

"I'm sure Nicole will agree with me about the child's future, Alex. Won't you, my dear?"

"I-If it is for the good of the child, I'm sure I do."

"Of course it's for the good of the child. You see, when you and Alex were married, he felt the need to protect

you, should anything happen to him—not that anything would happen, since he's young and strong—but he signed over to you his rights to Live Oak. Of course, now that there is to be an heir, I expect you'll want to provide for proper succession of the land by putting in writing the child's right to the property . . . naturally under Alex's guidance, until the child comes of age."

Nicole did not appear at all disturbed by Emily's words. Only Alex was made uncomfortable. Did she really not remember that Quinton had sighed the property over to her? But when Nicole in all innocence spoke of Emily's idea as a lovely thought, Alex was again exceedingly uncomfortable. He had to put an end to the discussion. He must protect Nicole until she was able to do so herself. But how? And was there really a way to protect her and know the truth?

"Mother, can we discuss this another time? The child is not yet born."

Emily watched her son's expression, and her rage grew. Alex loved this woman. She was sure of it now! His every look and gesture spoke his feelings. And in that moment, Emily tasted the bitter knowledge that no man had ever looked at her in the same way as her son now looked at his wife. His emotions were as plain as were his father's, when he had first seen Cecila. Each of them lost all sense of reason in the presence of a pretty, dependent woman. Emily clenched her jaw, determined more than ever to see Nicole punished for what she'd done to Quinton and for those sins committed against Emily Chandler herself. For the moment, Emily would leave it alone. But she would see to it that Nicole signed over the property to the child. "It's been a lovely visit," Emily said, mustering the needed politeness, uncomfortably aware that Alex might

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have guessed her feelings as she'd guessed his. "It's been a long day for Nicole, and she needs her rest."

Alex dropped a light kiss on Nicole's brow and gently caressed the nape of her neck as he rose to escort his mother home. "I think you're right, Mother. We can't let anything happen to her now, can we?"

Nicole felt the tension that invaded the room as Emily said, "No, not now."

Her mother-in-law's words sounded innocent enough, but she sensed some hidden meaning. Foolish, Nicole chided herself as she walked to the door with them. You're seeing ghosts and hidden meanings in everything today.

Nicole accepted Emily's farewell embrace and waved them good-bye from the veranda. As the carriage disappeared down the drive, Nicole could not help but note the angry expressions on Emily and Alex's face. Why are they arguing? she wondered as she returned to the house.

She wasn't sure why, but Nicole thought of Emma Bailey, so different from Emily, her clothes and manner simple and direct, so warm and caring. She and Sam were so very dear to Nicole. Now that things were more settled for her, she'd write them. They would be so happy about the child—their grandchild as much as Emily's, despite the lack of blood ties.

It was late afternoon, but Nicole was not tired. She decided to explore her new surroundings. She began in the dining room with its large oval mahogany table. The servants kept it polished to a high luster, and Nicole could see her reflection in its rich burgundy depths. The crystal chandelier that hung above it was mirrored also in its rich grained surface. White damask drapes covered the tall windows, their sways embroidered with golden thread, as were the tie-backs. The cypress wood floor was covered by a deep gold rug. A mahogany buffet sat against one wall. Its front

was intricately carved into the image of Live Oak. On it rested the large silver tea service and several crystal vases, which contained beautiful red roses.

Nicole inhaled their sweetness and decided to forgo the rest of her inspection of the house. She longed to be outside in the gardens so that she could enjoy the fragrances of everything in bloom.

It did not take Nicole long to cross the veranda and make her way to the rose garden. The blossoms lay fully open and their fragrance filled the early-evening air.

Nicole slowly wandered among the different shades of roses until she came to a vivid red-blossomed plant. She picked one large bloom, closed her eyes, and savored the sweet scent.

"It's lovely, isn't it?" A voice startled her from behind. Nicole dropped the bloom at her feet as she turned swiftly to face the intruder. The color left her cheeks as she saw John Sentelle casually leaning against the rose-covered trellis.

Nicole slowly began to back away, her lips trembling. "How did you find me?"

Sentelle nonchalantly twirled a long-stemmed rose between his fingers, his voice oozing with unaccustomed pride. "That was the easy part. All I did was ask at Chandler's office. I told them I had some furs he wanted to inspect and that's all it took. Aren't you glad to see me?" Sentelle grinned, smug and self-satisfied.

Nicole took a deep breath and tried to put on a brave front. Only her voice betrayed her, with a tremor all too obvious, when she asked, "Why did you follow me?"

"Well, there are several reasons, but the main one is that I think your husband—as you call him—should know whom he's married."

"What do you mean?" she asked, and she shivered as

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his hands played over her arms and drew her to him. Sentelle continued to grin and slowly ran his hand along the column of her throat. "You know exactly what I'm talking about, girl—that rich Mr. Chandler's wife is a murderer. It would be a pity to have her lovely neck stretched by the sheriff's rope."

"Please," Nicole begged as she tried to push out of his embrace. "You know that I haven't killed anyone. Why do you torture me like this? What do you want of me? What have I done to make you hate me so?"

Sentelle chuckled as his hand tightened around Nicole's slender throat. "One thing you did was run away from me. I lost a lot of money because of that little stunt. I also took a beating from one of the trappers who'd been really hot for you. I paid with my hide for your little episode, girl. So you owe me."

The sun had set and the evening shadows had grown deeper as he held Nicole prisoner. He could see the fear in her eyes, and it gave him a sense of power, the same power that was aroused when he found an animal caught in the teeth of one of his steel-jawed traps. Abruptly he released Nicole's throat. "Unless you can think of a way to pay me for all the suffering that I've had to endure because of you, I'll just turn you over to the law. Justice should be served. Don't you agree?"

Nicole nearly collapsed as he stepped away from her. She swayed briefly as she rubbed her aching throat, her thoughts nearly incoherent. "Repay you? I haven't any money." She knew that she was on the brink of hysteria and fought to keep control of herself.

"You mean to tell me your husband doesn't give you any money? That's a laugh. He's as rich as sin, I gather. You had better stop your lies, 'cause I don't believe them. If you don't want him to know about you, then you'd

better think of something quick. I don't have all night."

Nicole shuddered and wrapped her arms about herself. She had no money. The only thing of value she possessed was her wedding gift from Alex. "All I have is a necklace but you can't have that!"

Sentelle stepped threateningly toward her. "Then I will have to wait until your man returns, won't I?"

Tears brimmed in Nicole's eyes, but she held back the sobs that threatened. Sentelle was evil, and though she knew she'd lost to him, she must try to keep from crumbling before him. She would have to do as he asked. There was too much to lose otherwise—Alex, the baby she carried—they were her life. Nicole turned toward the house. "I'll go and get the necklace."

Sentelle was hard pressed to contain himself. The girl would believe anything he told her. He could keep on collecting for the rest of his life. He was near drunk with the sense of power and good fortune. "Yup, Sentelle," he said, "'twas a smart move."

In the house, Nicole's hand trembled as she opened the small black box. She gazed down at the iridescent pearls and gently took them from their bed of velvet. Sentelle would never know how much she treasured this small strand of pearls. It was a symbol of Alex's love for her. It hurt terribly to give it over to such a vile creature. Yet it was better to lose the necklace than to lose the man she loved.

Nicole held them close for the last time and then quickly stuffed them into the pocket of her gown. She hurried back to the garden. She had to get Sentelle away from Live Oak before Alex returned. She handed the necklace to him, and he quickly stuffed it into his pocket and patted it. "That will do for now. But you had better have something worth a lot more for me next time, or it's the hangman's rope for

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you." Then Sentelle bowed. "Adieu, for now," he said.

Whatever had held her together while Sentelle was there melted as his shadow disappeared behind the shrubbery. Nicole sank onto the bench he had vacated. What would she do? It seemed that her life kept entangling with a past she could not remember. Would she ever be free of it and able to control her own life? she wondered.



CHAPTER 13

As the first frost of the year glistened on the landscape of Live Oak, Alex was about to leave for New Orleans. He held Nicole close, enjoying the feel of her rounding belly against his own hard body. He was convinced that he'd felt life stirring within her, though Nicole was equally convinced it was too early.

"My son is already jealous of his father," he said. "When he arrives I'll be lucky to have any time with you at all."

Nicole laughed, happy in her own feeling, but even more joyous that Alex so looked forward to the baby coming. Still warm within the circle of his arms, her eyes widened in surprise. Alex wasn't far off in his surmise. "The baby moved," she cried. "He moved!" She took his hand and placed it over her stomach. "Do you feel him?"

He had, and he swung Nicole off her feet and danced with her across the room. She hugged him, thrilled by the sensation of the life that moved inside her. Never had she felt so much joy.

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Slowly, Alex lowered her to the floor, noting in her eyes a mirror image of the love that had grown within his own heart. He could not resist the temptation of her soft, pliant lips. And as he savored the taste of her, his passion built, until suddenly he released her and shook his head. He picked up his great cape and hat. "Darling, I must go now, or I will have to cancel my trip altogether and carry you off to bed."

An impish grin lighting her face, Nicole straightened his hat and smoothed an errant wisp of his hair. She then kissed his cheek. "Let it not be said that I detained you from business. Though I must say your idea has great merit."

Alex laughed as he set her away from him. "Woman, you would tempt the devil himself. Be off to your duties of caring for my son."

Nicole's soft lips pouted invitingly as she looked up at her husband innocently. "Care for your son! He isn't even born yet and all you can think of is his care—or should I say *her* care? And what about the babe's poor mother, who will have to return to her bed, alone?"

Dramatically, Alex placed a hand over his heart and raised his eyes in supplication to the Almighty. "Oh, how dearly I need protection from lustful women." He then swatted Nicole on the rear. "Be off, I say, or I'll never make it to New Orleans."

All playfulness left Nicole as she realized that Alex needed to leave. She hugged him close. It was the same each time he went away on business. She kept him with her to the very last moment, used any excuse to delay his departure. She was afraid to be alone.

During past months the only happiness that she could claim was during those moments she spent with Alex. He was her barrier against the recurring flashes of memory

that left her confused and disoriented. He was also her protection against Sentelle.

The man came only when Alex was away, and this in itself made her nervous. Alex's schedule was never exact, yet Sentelle would arrive soon after he departed. This gave Nicole the feeling that she was being watched at all times. After each of Sentelle's visits, those gifts that Alex brought to Nicole following his trips could be found in Sentelle's pockets. It took everything Nicole could scrape together to satisfy him.

The flashes from the past and the tension of these visits were beginning to have their effect upon Nicole. She fought hard the depressions that threatened daily, knowing that they could harm the child she carried. That and the love she held for her husband helped sustain her. And her letters from the Baileys helped some, too, though she was finding it increasingly difficult to maintain a cheerful flow of news. It was hard enough trying to keep Alex from suspecting that anything was wrong. What if he began to demand explanations that she dared not give him? Nicole was in a constant state of agitation.

"Alex, I love you so much. Please try to make it home tonight," Nicole said as she pressed herself against him.

Alex let his fingers play gently through her dark tresses as his lips touched her ear. "I will try, but I can't say for sure. The *Sea Gull* docked yesterday and I'll have to check its cargo."

Nicole clung to him a moment longer, then resigned herself to what she knew would come. She gave Alex one last kiss before she ran up the stairs.

Alex watched Nicole's flight, prickles of worry fanning at his insides. He left the house and entered his carriage, still brooding over Nicole's health. She was too pale, and the soft skin beneath her eyes was darkly shadowed. Alex

felt responsible for the state of her health. She'd become pregnant too quickly after her ordeal, and he wondered whether she was physically strong enough to carry the child. She tried to convince him that all was well with her, but in unguarded moments he saw the worry in her face.

Alex sensed that something other than her physical condition disturbed Nicole. During these past months he'd found her staring vacantly out windows, her hands lying still on the small garments she made for the baby, her face sad and full of fear.

Has she remembered something? Alex wondered. Or am I just imagining things? Maybe all expectant mothers act this way. Still, he was not alone in his observations of the change that had come over her. After his mother's last visit she had questioned him about it. Emily hoped that Nicole's memory was beginning to return so they might finally arrive at the truth.

Emily had been furious with Alex for not having interrogated Nicole. He'd finally managed to soothe his mother by explaining that this was not the time to badger her because he might jeopardize the life of his child. For the time being, Emily was appeased, especially since Nicole had already signed over to Alex in trust for their child her rights to Live Oak.

Now he had his own worries to deal with. He had to do something to bring Nicole out of her depression. Perhaps some really special bauble would help. He'd made it a point to interest her in the faraway places from which came his trade. Whenever a cargo arrived from Europe or the Orient, he would pick out a dainty brooch, a mother-of-pearl jewelry box, or a small silk fan. Nicole always seemed pleased with his gifts, and they talked some about where they had come from, but that appeared to end both the mention and the appearance of the gift. Maybe a visit

to the jeweler was in order. He might have something especially appropriate, something she would not put away. That settled, Alex turned his thoughts to business.

The Chandler lines were growing fast, and Alex had begun to think about starting his own shipyards. Why did he need to go all over the world to buy and man his vessels? Why couldn't he build ships right here on the Mississippi and even sell them abroad? He might just do that. For now he needed to deal with other matters.

By late afternoon, Alex wearily leaned back in his chair and propped his boots on the desk as he lit a cheroot. He had just finished the last of his work. It had taken him eight hours to complete the pile of papers that had been on his desk this morning. The bill of lading that lay before him was all that remained, and it only needed his signature.

Glancing at his watch, Alex realized that if he hurried he would be able to make it to the jeweler before he closed. Smiling, he crushed out the cheroot and stretched his aching muscles. He would make it back to Live Oak tonight. It would be nice to be at home and let Nicole's slender hands massage the soreness from his shoulders and back. He chuckled at the thought of what would come after that.

If Alex worried about Nicole's health in one way, he was not concerned about her sexual appetite. If anything, Nicole's need for love had increased within the last months. She never seemed to tire of their lovemaking. Sometimes Alex wondered if this could harm the baby, but Nicole assured him that it would not.

She was a lusty wench, all right. Alex laughed as he slipped into his suede jacket and adjusted his cravat. But their appetites were perfectly matched. As he thought of Nicole, Alex could feel his loins tighten, and he quickly

left the office. He wanted to reach the jeweler and then head for Live Oak as quickly as possible.

It was late and the jeweler had already begun to lock up for the night when Alex tapped on the door. The little man quickly recognized Alex and let him enter. "Mr. Chandler, how nice to see you. What can I do for you?"

Alex smiled at the bespectacled little man. "I want something special for my wife. I thought she might like a necklace to match a pair of earrings I gave her last month."

"Ah, yes," the man said as he hurried behind the glass counter and removed the night covering from it. "What did you have in mind? I have several lovely pieces." He picked up a slender strand of pearls with a distinctive diamond clasp and held them to the light for Alex to view. "How about something like this?"

Every muscle in Alex's body grew rigid at the sight of the necklace. He'd had the clasp especially designed. There could be no doubt that it was a necklace he'd given to Nicole.

The jeweler saw Alex's strained expression but was not quick enough to avoid the hand that reached out and grabbed the necklace. The man gasped as it was wrenched from him.

"Where did you get this necklace?" Alex demanded, his voice hoarse with the emotions that were tearing his insides apart.

The jeweler stuttered, "I—I . . ." But before he could give Alex a coherent answer, his collar was seized in a viselike grip, and Alex jerked him halfway over the counter. "I asked you where you got this damn necklace? Answer me man, or you'll pay dearly."

"Sir, M—Mr. Chandler, I—I bought it from a trapper who came through. Sir, what is it? Is it stolen?" the jeweler choked.

Shoving the man back across the counter, Alex said, "How much do you want for it?"

The jeweler shook from head to toe. His head bobbed on his shoulders. "Two hundred dollars."

Alex took the money from his pocket and threw it at the jeweler. "Have you bought anything else from this man?"

Nervously, the jeweler nodded his head and pointed toward several other counters. Alex's eyes scanned their contents and picked out the small gifts he had given Nicole. His heart felt as if it were being split asunder. He closed his eyes briefly to regain his composure. "Do you know the trapper's name?" Alex's voice had the ring of defeat. His shoulders slumped as he waited for the answer he already knew. "Sentelle, sir. I believe that is the name he gave me. John Sentelle."

Stuffing the necklace in his pocket, Alex turned from the jeweler. "I'm sorry for my actions, sir. I do beg your pardon."

Alex stepped from the jewelry shop and took a long, deep breath. So many thoughts rushed into his mind that it was hard to decide what to do next. He opened the carriage door and seated himself against the velvet seat before he let the situation completely sink into his brain. When it did, he cursed himself for every kind of a fool. His mood was as black as the night in which he traveled.

Damn, you played me for the fool that I am. I didn't believe you in the beginning, but that damn beautiful, innocent-looking face of yours made an idiot of me. Mother was right all along. The slime of the swamps dwells within that luscious body of yours, Nicole Sentelle Chandler. Damn you to hell! Alex slammed his fist into the seat as tears brimmed in his eyes. He laid his head against the seat and closed his eyes. "But you will pay, you bitch. You will pay dearly for all your lies!" Alex's dark eyes nar-

rowed vengefully as he gritted his teeth and ground out, "Not even the child you carry can save you now!"

Alex leaned from the carriage window and ordered the driver to speed the horses. He had urgent business awaiting him at Live Oak.

Nicole had told the cook to hold dinner in the hope that Alex would be able to return from New Orleans. When she heard the carriage come to a halt in front of the house, she rushed to the door and flung it open. A bright smile touched her lips as Alex descended from the carriage and walked up the path and onto the veranda.

Alex saw her standing in the doorway and eyed her coldly, his face rigid, his mind with but one thought, to wrench the truth from her.

"Hurry, darling, before you freeze," Nicole said as she took his arm and escorted him into the house. "I told Cook to hold dinner for you. I'm so glad you're here."

The joy of seeing Alex blinded Nicole to his somber mood. She threw her arms about him and tried to kiss him and found herself rudely pushed away. Alex turned to remove his cape while Nicole stood aside, stunned. Alex hadn't acted this way since they'd come to Live Oak. What could have caused so drastic a change in him? Tentatively, she touched the sleeve of his jacket. "Alex, what's wrong?" Alex remained silent. He looked down at the hand that lay on his arm and flung it from him, then rang for the butler.

When Jordan answered the summons, Alex gave orders that all of the servants, including Jordan, were to be removed to the slave quarters. Not a word was exchanged between Alex and Nicole until after Jordan had returned to inform Alex that his orders had been carried out. As Jordan turned to leave, Alex said, "I mean what I say,

Jordan. I want no one in this house tonight except Mrs. Chandler and me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Jordan answered, confused by the instructions he'd been given. In twenty years he'd not been sent to sleep in the slave quarters. He was offended. White folks sure are strange sometimes. First, I am ordered to act like I never see'd the little missy before she come back, and now Master Alex orders me to the quarters like a field hand. Jordan shook his head and left the house.

Alex's lips were tightly compressed, his eyes dark with anger as he strode past Nicole to the liquor cabinet. He poured himself a generous amount of bourbon and downed it.

Nicole was baffled by his strange behavior. He had neither spoken to her nor looked at her. And as the moments lengthened, she became increasingly uncomfortable. An ominous fear took hold of her, but she knew that she had to confront him. She could no longer stand the tension.

Gathering her courage, Nicole spoke finally. "Alex, what is wrong? What's happened?" She reached out again to touch his arm, and he shook off her hand as though it had burned him. He turned to her, his eyes blazing with rage. The devious little bitch was trying to lure him under her spell again, he thought as his lips curled into what might have been a smile but was more a grotesque caricature of one. Slowly, Nicole began to back away from him. She could not say he was her husband. This man was totally different from the man she had grown to love. He exuded anger from every pore of his body. He was a menacing figure and Nicole was afraid.

"Alex?" she said, her throat constricted. She turned a deathly white as Alex came toward her. Her eyes widened in shock as he slowly withdrew the strand of pearls from his pocket and held it up for her inspection. "It seems I

have seen this somewhere before," he said, and he began to twirl the necklace about his fingers as though trying to place them. He pretended to think harder and closely examined the clasp; then a twisted smile of recognition appeared on his face. "Oh, yes. I do believe this was a wedding gift to my wife. One that I so lovingly placed around her silken throat the morning after she told me she was to bear my child. So tenderly I placed them around her white throat when, instead, I should have strangled her with them!"

Nicole realized only too clearly the full impact of what was happening. She must explain about the necklace. She must say something, anything, but she could find no words. She stood motionless, terrified, her mouth agape. Then Alex grabbed her and pulled her against him. He ran his hand across her throat and began to encircle it with his fingers. "I see you are speechless, dear wife. It is unusual for you not to have an explanation at hand. You are so surprised that a lie eludes you. Come, explain how Sentelle came to sell your wedding gift."

Nicole could not stop the tears that streamed down her face. She closed her eyes and shook her head and tried to free herself from his bruising embrace. "Alex," she choked, "you're hurting me."

Alex released his hold on Nicole and shoved her into a chair, his expression brutally cold. He wouldn't strike her, Nicole thought. That was so unlike him, so alien to the gentle man she'd come to know and love. But he looked so threatening, she argued, and it was not herself alone she wanted to protect. Their baby. . . . Nicole sprang from the chair and ran up the stairs. She prayed with each step that she could reach her room and barricade the door against him until his anger cooled.

Nicole's steps were no match for Alex's long strides. He caught her at the top of the landing and grabbed her.

Nicole struggled to be free of him. At the precise moment that Alex gained control of himself and released his savage hold on her, Nicole stepped away from him. When she realized that there was nothing beneath her but space, her eyes widened in terror. Desperately, she tried to reach out to him as he, now aware of the danger, tried to grasp her. Oh, no, Nicole thought as she plunged down the winding stairs, her scream tearing through the still night.

Dazed, Alex stared down at Nicole's crumpled figure. She lay with her head back and one arm beneath her, as though she were trying to protect the life she carried. Seconds later, bile rising inside him, Alex raced down the stairs and gently raised Nicole in his arms. He bent close, taking in her chalky pallor and checked to see that she still breathed. When he was certain of that, he released his own breath and begged forgiveness of the Lord. It had been an accident, but he'd been responsible for it all the same.

Before lifting her into his arms, Alex checked to see that there were no broken bones. Nicole was limp as he carried her to her room. She groaned when he placed her on the bed, and her hand sought the swell of her belly. As he slipped the gown from her, Alex knew that the child was lost. Her blood now soaked the sheet.

His stomach turned and before it gave way he quickly ran from the house. Tears streamed down his face as he ran to the slave quarters for help. Mama Josie was the midwife and would know how to help Nicole.

When they returned, the old woman shooed Alex from the room. "This ain't no place for you. You seem in worse shape than the missy. Now, get. I got my hands full without you to take care of, Master Alex."

Nicole tossed and turned on the bed. She groaned again

as the pain wracked her body. She did not fully comprehend what was happening to her. Between the headaches and the pains that tore through her belly, Nicole could not think. She screamed her agony into the dark night but found no release until the sun crept over the tall pines to warm the frost-covered earth.

Alex sat slumped in a chair outside the bedroom and suffered her agony. He longed to be with Nicole, at least to comfort her if he could, to hold her close and somehow infuse her body with his strength. But each time he attempted to enter the room, the midwife barred the door against him. After several tries, he finally gave up and sat down to wait, Nicole's screams searing his soul. Choked with guilt, he laid his head against the wall and wept.

"Alex, what's happened?" Emily asked as she rushed to her son. Jordan had gone for her as soon as it was learned that Nicole would lose the child. In her hurry to be with Alex, Emily had not combed her hair, and it hung in wild disarray down her back. She had only taken time to toss on an old morning gown she used for gardening. Alex hardly recognized his mother. He'd never seen her in such a bedraggled state, he thought—then his mind went back to troubled thoughts of Nicole.

Emily saw the misery in her son's eyes, his stubbled cheeks damp with tears. He was very dear to her, and her heart went out to him. Gently she caressed his cheek and asked again what had happened.

Fresh tears came to his eyes as he clasped his mother about her waist and hugged her. He pressed his face against her and sobbed, "I killed my own child."

Emily wrapped her arms around Alex's shoulders, patting him and stroking him as she had done when he'd been a child himself and skinned his knees. He was no longer a boy, but he needed her now more than he'd ever needed

her. "Alex, I don't know what happened here last night, but I'm sure it was an accident. You would never harm Nicole intentionally. I know that, and you've got to see it also."

Alex buried his head against her. "Mama, I did. I was angry and we fought. Nicole fell because of me. Don't you see? I am responsible for her being in there."

Emily pushed her son away and stared down into his anguished face. She brushed a stray curl from his forehead and wiped away his tears. "Alex, it was an accident. Hush, now. You can't do Nicole any good by tearing yourself apart. You have to be strong. Nicole will need you more than ever after this is over."

Alex wearily closed his eyes and ran his fingers through his unkempt hair. "I'm afraid, Mother, that our future is no more. Even if this had not happened, it would have all been over for Nicole and me after last night."

Emily pulled a striped silk Louis XIV chair to her son's side and sat down. She took his large hand within her own and asked, "What do you mean?"

Alex did not look into his mother's eyes as he spoke but kept his gaze lowered to the Oriental rug. He slowly shook his head as he accepted total defeat. "Nicole has been lying all along. She has been giving Sentelle her jewelry to sell. I found out and we quarreled."

The compassion Emily had been feeling for the woman in the next room evaporated. During these past months she had seen her son's happiness and had begun to believe Nicole's story. Now she was outraged. She squeezed her son's hand, anger sweeping through her body. Emily knew that she should never have let down her guard even though her son had done so. Her hatred was revived in full, seeming even more intense as she looked at her son's haggard face.

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“Alex, can’t you now see that none of this was your fault? She brought it on herself. She’s now paying in full for all of her lies. She deserves even more.”

Alex was astonished by his mother’s statement and shook his head. “Mother, you can’t mean that. It was my child she carried.”

Emily stood abruptly and balled her fist as she looked at her son. “Yes, it was your child, but it’s a blessing that she lost it. I’m glad no grandchild of mine will carry the taint of her blood within its body. If she lives, Alex, I can promise you she will pay even further for the misery she has brought to this house.”

Emily could not stand to look at her son’s unhappy face any longer. She turned and ran down the stairs. She had to get away from Live Oak before she did someone damage. Preferably, Nicole Sentelle Chandler.

Alex heard the carriage as it pulled away from the house, and a sense of relief swept over him. He couldn’t take much more. Weren’t the screams that echoed through the house enough? To see as well the hatred his mother bore Nicole brought even greater pain.

Alex heard the latch on the door turn and held his breath as Mama Josie came from the room. She closed the door softly and turned to him. He could see the sadness in her eyes as she looked at him and shook her head. “The babe was too small, but I think the missy will be all right.”

Alex released the breath he had been holding as relief flooded through his tired body. Nicole would live. He thanked Mama Josie and dropped a gold dollar in her hand. She gave him a snaggletoothed grin as she dropped the money into her apron and patted him on the back. He could hear her singing as he quickly entered Nicole’s room and closed the door.

The room was quiet and in deep shadow. All Alex could

discern was the pale, still figure lying beneath the quilt.

Silently, he made his way to the bed. Nicole's hair was tangled about her face. Her thick lashes hid those beautiful indigo eyes. Her lips so moist and soft in remembered touch were parched and colorless. The only sign of life was the slow rise and fall of her chest as she breathed.

Alex drew a chair to the bed and sat down. "Nicole," he whispered. "My sweet Nicole. Why have we caused each other so much grief? I had such hope for our future. I was willing to put the past out of my mind and build a life for us and our children. Nicole, my love was so great for you I would have accepted anything you had done. Now I know it can never be. The tiny life so suddenly taken from us has taken everything else with it. Even if I could forgive myself, I know you would never be able to forgive me."

Alex lowered his head to the bed and let the last of his tears flow and quietly left the room. He walked slowly down the stairs and into the drawing room, where he proceeded to drink himself senseless.



CHAPTER 14

It had been two weeks since Nicole's accident. She had drifted in and out of consciousness for several days afterward, and everyone on the plantation feared for her life. She called out for Alex in her delirium, but her cry went unanswered. Alex remained secluded in his own room, drinking and trying to come to terms with the events of the past days.

After a week, Alex returned from his self-imposed exile. He had laid to rest his guilt, and along with it, he thought, his love for Nicole. Had he not fallen in love with her, he reasoned, he would have been able to see through her lies from the beginning. He'd pushed the death of their child from his mind completely. The blame for all that had happened was Nicole's alone. This was the defense he'd created against the madness that had threatened him since that fateful night.

Though his face was shaved of the dark growth of beard that had covered it, its young, boyish quality was gone. In its place was a somber dignity. The man who ordered his

carriage brought around was someone who would always carefully consider each action before he took it.

Alex had business to attend in New Orleans. He knew that Nicole had regained consciousness, though he'd not apprised himself personally of her welfare. The servants had kept him informed of her condition. He told himself that it was too soon to see her, but in truth he was afraid to face her, afraid to test his new-found feelings toward her.

As Alex left the house, Nicole had just finished her first full meal since she'd regained consciousness. She had no real want of food but knew that she needed nourishment so that her strength would return and she could leave the plantation. She wanted to be away from Live Oak as quickly as possible, away from the horrible memories—because she had begun to piece together her past and now knew it all. The fall had benefited her that much. She knew also that everything she'd ever loved or wanted had been taken from her—her child, her mother, Quinton, Alex, and Live Oak itself, which now belonged to Alex. Everything was gone, and all because of a packet of lies that even now could not be set straight. She was surprised to feel still more tears slip down her cheeks. She'd thought that there could be no more. And then there were no more. There was only hate. And from that hate she drew strength. She would have her revenge on the two men who had destroyed all that had given her happiness. Sentelle had been responsible for the suicides of both her parents, and Alex had done the rest, had taken her child and Live Oak, the only legacy left to her. She'd forgotten for the moment that it was Emily who kept insisting she sign over the plantation. Alex had, in fact, opposed the move to sign the property over to him in trust for the baby. Still it was *Alex* who would benefit.

When Alex did finally visit Nicole he found her sitting

up in bed and enjoying her breakfast. He hesitated before he entered the room, aware of the need to apologize for his part in the accident but bereft of words. Were there indeed any words to encompass so painful a loss? In an attempt to ease the tension of the moment, he smiled and came to sit near the bed. The smile quickly left his lips as Nicole's cool gaze rested upon him.

"Nicole, I'm sorry for what happened. A-as God is my witness, I would undo it if I could."

"Would you, Alex? Would you also undo all the lies you told me?"

Alex was puzzled. "Lies? I've told you no lies, Nicole."

Nicole laughed, but her voice held no joy. "Alex, I remember everything. If any good came from my fall, it was to open my eyes to the deceit around me."

Upon hearing Nicole's words, any sense of remorse Alex held had left him. "So, now you remember?" he said, his voice casual so as not to reveal the anger that now filled his every pore.

"Yes, I remember! I know we were not married until we said our vows in Cottersville."

"Well, I see you do remember. And since your memory has conveniently returned, maybe now you'll clear up a few things for us. I want you to tell me how my uncle died, Nicole."

"Quinton? You told me Quinton committed suicide."

"Yes, that's what everyone thinks, except mother and me. You were here that night. Tell me, Nicole, how did my uncle die?"

Nicole closed her eyes as though to shut out that horrible night. She could not tell Alex why Quinton shot himself. The humiliation that he must have felt upon finding he'd fallen in love with his own daughter had to be more

terrible than facing his own death. No, she'd not smear his memory with such an obscenity.

Suddenly Nicole realized Alex's intent, the unspoken insinuation in the question. "You think I killed him, don't you? That was the reason for all of this. The lies you told to get me back to Live Oak! The marriage! Everything you did was because you thought I murdered Quinton! Even signing over Live Oak to your heir."

Alex chose to ignore her last words and said, "Then what happened the night you disappeared? You were the only person here. Tell me!"

Nicole knew that she could not tell Alex of Sentelle's visit, or she would have to explain everything to him. It was Quinton's name she had to protect at all cost. She tightened the hold on herself and stubbornly looked away from Alex.

Seeing her unyielding stance, Alex forgot her weakened condition. He shook her brutally. "Tell me, damn you! You'll not keep me from the truth. I've gone through too much hell to find out what happened and nothing will stop me." His fingers now bit into Nicole's flesh, but she made no sound. She welcomed the pain he inflicted upon her, because it helped solidify the hate she felt for him. She gazed into his eyes with a coldness equaling his. "I hate you! Why don't you kill me as you killed my child and have done with it. I'd dearly welcome such release."

Nicole's words were like the blow of a hammer. He released her abruptly as though she'd turned to fire. "You killed Quinton to get Live Oak, didn't you?"

At that moment, Nicole wanted to tear him to shreds. She longed for his blood to flow as hers had flowed when the baby had slipped from her womb.

"There are only two people in this world I long to see dead, and Quinton DuPree was not one of them. I did not

kill Quinton. I loved him. I don't care whether you believe me or not, but that is the only answer you'll ever get from my lips. Now, get out. Get out of my sight. I hate you. Do you understand? I hate you."

Alex wanted to throttle her but decided he'd best leave her before he indeed did her damage. He slammed the door as he left, her screams of hatred following him down the stairs.

Nicole's rage continued as she flung pillows and bedcovers to the floor. She had to get away from Live Oak. It didn't matter how she went or where she went, so long as she wasn't under the same roof as Alex.

She scrambled from the bed and was surprised to find herself grasping at the bedpost for support. She was still weak, but she'd not let that deter her. She collected herself and made her way to the cherry armoire, opening its door with such violence that some of its delicate carvings were shattered. She pulled down several gowns and stuffed them into her portmanteau, along with some slippers and undergarments. She looked about the room for any other items she might want, but saw none. Alex had wanted Live Oak and he was welcome to it. Nicole desired nothing more than her freedom. There was simply too much pain here for her to remain.

Nicole managed to dress herself, and as she slipped her velvet cape about her shoulders she looked back at the room and said softly, "Good-bye Quinton, my love. Your secret is safe with me. Now you and Mama can be together. Take good care of your grandchild." She then turned and left the room, closing the door as she closed from her heart all of the hurt that Live Oak had been these past months.

She stopped at the library door to announce to Alex her intention, and to ask him to have the carriage brought around.

Alex turned from the fire. "What do you mean, leaving?"

"I mean exactly that. You have Live Oak and I want nothing more here. This place has brought only grief to me."

"And you have brought nothing to Live Oak but grief. Quinton DuPree would still be alive if it were not for you. I am convinced of that. You can be assured that I'll not rest until I have proven it."

"You may never rest if that is the case. I am innocent of what you claim, but that's of no concern to me now. I just want to be free of this place and of you."

"You'll not leave until I know the truth," Alex said, moving toward her.

She didn't know whether he intended to do her physical harm, but she knew that she was not strong enough even to deal with him verbally. Dressing and coming downstairs had drained her more than she wanted to admit. She had to get away from him. "I'm leaving," she told him again, "and you can't stop me."

"Then, my dear, you will walk. Let's see how far you get in this weather."

Nicole headed for the front door, where she set her portmanteau down and raised the hood of her cape. Without a backward glance, she said, "This is how I arrived at Live Oak and this is how I shall leave it." She opened the door and stepped out into the cold winter evening.

Alex stared mutely at the empty space where Nicole had stood. "Damn that woman. Let her freeze!" he muttered as he strode briskly back to the blazing fire. Picking up his empty whiskey glass, he refilled it and downed its contents.

"She's mad. No one in his right mind would attempt such a journey on foot in this weather," he said, but he could not let it rest. Flinging his glass into the fireplace, he quickly followed in Nicole's wake. As he left the house he

shouted for Jordan to bring the carriage. He would take Nicole to New Orleans himself, but that was all he would do for her. Let her crawl back into the gutter from which she came. She would not, however, escape his watchful eye. Nicole Chandler would be hanged for the murderer she was when he had his proof.

Nicole stopped at the end of the drive to catch her breath. It would not be easy in her condition to make it to New Orleans, but she was determined she would not return to Live Oak. She had no idea of what she'd do once she reached the city. She would stay at the townhouse until she found employment, she thought.

Nicole's feet faltered and perspiration beaded her forehead. She was already exhausted, but a sense of relief swept through her as the carriage pulled to a stop beside her. Her relief evaporated when Alex opened the carriage door. "Get in," he commanded.

Nicole stubbornly shook her head. "I'm leaving, Alex. I won't go back with you."

"And I don't want you back. I'll take you to New Orleans. From there you're on your own. You can go back to the brothel, or wherever you came from, with my blessings."

Nicole did not trust him, yet the cold wind that whipped about her had chilled her to the bone. She was too weak to walk and he knew it. Slowly, she climbed into the carriage and settled herself as far away from Alex's imposing figure as possible.

The journey was spent in silence, both engrossed in their own thoughts. It was dark when the carriage reached New Orleans, and Alex leaned from the window and gave the driver instructions.

Nicole noticed from the passing scene that the street

lights had become fewer and the buildings more dilapidated. They were not going toward the townhouse. She turned to Alex, her eyes flashing with anger. "Were do you think you are taking me? This isn't the way to the townhouse."

"How very perceptive of you, my dear. No, we are not going to the townhouse but to where you belong. The waterfront, where the brothels are to be found."

He couldn't mean what he said, Nicole told herself. All manner of things happened in the night to women who wandered unknowingly into this area. "I don't want to go to the waterfront. I want to go to the townhouse."

Alex shook his head. "I'm sorry, my dear, but my townhouse has been closed since we moved to the country. You'll just have to stay at a hotel. Here we are," Alex said as the carriage came to a halt in front of a nondescript building. He reached across her and opened the door, placing in her hand at this time a small purse. Nicole would dearly have loved to throw the money back at him, but she knew that she would need it to help her get settled.

The wind whipped Nicole's hood from her head, and her hair fell about her face. "You'll pay for the abuse you've inflicted upon me," she shouted up at Alex, the words catching on the wind.

"My dear, I have paid dearly from the moment I first set eyes on you," Alex said, and leaning further out of the carriage, a sudden burst of venom erupted from deep inside him. "But you had best beware, Nicole. It is you who will pay for what you have done to my family."

Alex slammed the door and ordered the driver to move on. As the carriage wheels rumbled over the cobbles, Alex experienced a jumble of conflicting feelings, which he neither understood nor felt comfortable with. Part of him rang with sordid epithets to himself for what he'd just done. How could he have left her alone and unprotected.

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She was, after all, still his wife. But she'd killed Quinton. What difference did it make what happened to her? He sat, frozen by indecision, wanting to go back for her and wanting her destruction.

Nicole stood paralyzed as well in the dim light that filtered through the windows of the building. It was a hotel, but not the sort of hotel in which she'd want to spend any time. She clutched her belongings with both hands as her eyes scanned the surrounding area. She was terrified. The street was deserted, the night cold, and most people were inside enjoying the warmth of their fires. Nicole knew that she could not remain where she was all night, and she slowly turned to the hotel. She took a step toward it, then rebelled. She would not treat herself in such a fashion. She was not a tramp and would not live on the waterfront.

Nicole turned her back on the place and began to walk. Either she would find decent lodgings or she would seek refuge in a church. She was not particularly devout, but she prayed fervently for her safety. When she turned the corner to a well-lighted street she thought her prayers had been answered. It was not long before she realized that she'd not found a safe haven. She was on a street lined with gambling houses and saloons. Drunken sailors sprawled on sidewalks and in alleys. Behind her was nothing but dark, deserted streets. There was nothing she could do but keep on going.

Nicole pulled her hood close around her face and hurried along the street. She stepped gingerly over several inebriated men as they lay sleeping off the effects of their liquor and managed to work her way to the end of the row of saloons without anyone accosting her. She took a deep breath as she stepped from the sidewalk into the street,

only to collide with a sailor who stumbled through the swinging doors of still another saloon. When his befogged brain registered the soft curves that fit his hands, he grinned a lopsided grin. "Well, what have we here?" He pushed her hood away from her face and his smile widened. She was something, all right! He pulled her close against him. "Now, my beauty, there wasn't no cause to nearly knock a poor fellow down. If you're looking for business, I'll be more than glad to accommodate you." The sailor's rough fingers were already working to loosen the tie at the neck of her cape.

Nicole pushed his eager hands away and tried to free herself from him. "Let me go!"

"So, you're the kind that likes to play rough. It makes it feel better, don't it? Well, I can accommodate you on that too, girly," he said as he forced her cape from her.

Nicole struggled, twisting and pushing at his broad chest, but she had no strength. Perhaps if she spoke to him, explained . . . "I'm not that sort. Please, you must understand."

But he wouldn't stop, and suddenly Nicole tripped and crumpled to the ground, the sailor tumbling with her. He laughed at her futile efforts to be free of him.

Darkness began to envelop her, but before total oblivion took hold she heard someone shout, "What in hell's going on here?" and the crushing weight was swiftly removed from her.

Nicole awoke in a spacious room. Her eyes traveled over the red silk-draped walls to the white velvet curtains. Slowly, she raised herself and shook her head. The place was beautiful, if somewhat overly dramatic, with its gleaming, dark mahogany furniture and exquisite crystal chandelier. She wondered where she was as she sat up in

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the large bed and pushed back the delicate lace mosquito netting to slide her feet to the large, padded footrest.

"So you're awake," A tall blond man had entered the room, his face full of gentle concern. "You had me worried for a while, you were so pale. I thought you were going to die. How do you feel?"

Nicole tried to return his smile, but her lips trembled. "I'm f-fine. W-where am I?"

The stranger pulled a chair close to the bed and sat down. "You're in my apartment above the Golden Louis, my gambling establishment. I found you in front of the building as you struggled with a sailor. You fainted just as I reached you. Are you sure you're all right?"

Nicole nodded, a bit more relaxed. "Yes, I am fine, and I must thank you for your timely rescue, Monsieur—?"

"Coltrane. Jim Coltrane, but my friends call me Colt. Now, madam, may I have the pleasure of knowing your name as well?"

Nicole hesitated, then told him. She did not like having to use the Chandler name, but it was hers, for the time being.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mademoiselle Chandler. Even though the circumstances were rather unpleasant."

Nicole stepped from the footrest to the thick rug. She swayed slightly and reached for the bed for support. Colt was at her side instantly. "Mademoiselle, you are not all right." He lifted her gently and placed her back on the bed.

"But I must leave. I have already inconvenienced you," Nicole said.

Colt settled himself into the chair again and looked at the woman who occupied his bed. Gambler's luck had been with him all his life and had once again paid off—

and handsomely. She was soft and beautiful and surely a tribute to those who had spawned her.

"Nonsense. There has been no inconvenience," he said. "It's not every day that I find a lovely lady to rescue."

Nicole was not immune to the decency she felt emanating toward her from across the room. He was bronzed and healthy-looking, and his startling green eyes held a speculative gleam, but beneath them, she felt, there was kindness.

"You must rest until you feel able to walk. Then I will take you home."

"Home?" Nicole looked startled and then realized that he assumed she lived somewhere in the city and had perhaps become lost.

"Yes. When you feel well enough I shall escort you to your home so nothing else can happen to you."

Colt watched for her reaction to what he'd said. His instincts told him that she was not lost, but they told him also that she was not a woman of the streets. She was refined and delicate and her gown was too expensive. And there were aspects about her that were not apparent in a surface sense, but signs nevertheless that she did not belong in this part of town.

"Escort me home," Nicole said, all her fears returning. She turned away from Colt's penetrating stare and continued, nervously, "Ah, yes, home." She tried to avoid the issue. "That will not be necessary. I will be fine."

"But I insist. It's far too dangerous for someone as lovely as you to walk about in an area like this at night." Colt watched Nicole's fingers fidget with the satin spread. "You do live nearby, don't you?"

Caught off guard, she struggled to construct some answer, but when his eyes captured hers, she said, "No. I don't live near here."

"Then where were you going?"

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She lowered her eyes and said simply, "I don't know."

He bent close to watch the emotions play across her face. She did not dissemble. "Then stay here," he suggested.

Her eyes widened. "I can't do that."

"Then where are you going to go?" he asked softly.

"I don't know . . . a hotel, perhaps."

"It seems to me you would be much better off accepting the hospitality I offer than wandering about the city."

Nicole gave up the battle. He was right and she knew it. But she wondered what the cost of his hospitality would be. It could not be much worse than what she'd experienced in the street below.

Jim Coltrane had never let a woman's tears cause him any distress. But when he saw her unhappiness he could do nothing but try to comfort her. "Hush, now. You're safe here. No one will harm you. Rest, and then tomorrow we'll try to find out what this is all about."

His words were comforting. She would rest here for the night, and tomorrow she'd decide about what the next step would be.

Nicole wiped her eyes with the handkerchief Colt had provided. "Thank you," she said, her face now relaxed, its translucent beauty shining. In that instant, Colt was held in a soft velvet gaze that had captured his heart.



CHAPTER 15

Nicole pulled the soft white wool shawl about her shoulders and stared at the wet, empty street below. Time had passed swiftly since the night Colt had rescued her. On the morning after the incident, Nicole had, in part, explained her predicament to him, and he'd insisted that she remain with him until she felt right about leaving.

A month had gone by and still she remained in Colt's luxurious quarters. She'd found a sanctuary and was reluctant to leave it. Nicole knew that she had to have a place of her own and some means to support herself. But she kept pushing aside the time of decision. Her strength had fully returned and her cheeks now glowed with health. Colt lavished her with attention, insisting that she eat every morsel of food she was given. And, when the weather permitted, he'd escort her about the city. He pampered her, bought her a dozen new gowns, and was constantly surprising her with beautiful little gifts much like the shawl she now wore.

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Nicole had seen the way Colt looked at her, and she knew he desired her. Up to now he'd been nothing but a gentleman toward her, but she sensed that it would not be much longer before his behavior changed. She had tried to refuse his gifts by insisting that she could never repay him for the generosity he had already shown to her. Colt firmly rebuffed her rejections. He maintained that he was her friend, and he did not expect repayment. However, Nicole was not certain of the truth of the statement. The looks and the seemingly inadvertent caresses he bestowed upon her made her doubt his sincerity. She knew that to remain at the Golden Louis was to court further involvement with him. He was a virile man, and handsome, with sandy hair and emerald eyes, but Nicole was not ready to pursue anything beyond the friendship she felt for him. She had not yet reckoned with the emotions she still felt for Alex. Nicole had once heard that hate and love were separated only by a fine line, and the truth of that statement had recently been made abundantly clear to her. Once, she had loved Alex as much as she now hated him, and she was not certain whether the pain in her heart was a result of the love she'd lost or the hate that had replaced it.

She'd thought about going to stay with the Baileys for a while, but even that seemed more than she could handle right now. She loved them and missed them, but because they were such good friends of Alex's, she couldn't bring herself to approach them. They'd feel divided between her and Alex. And they didn't know of Alex's duplicity. Nor about the loss of the baby. She felt that it would hurt them too much to tell them. She'd write them, soon, but not now.

Nicole continued to stare out the window, unaware that Colt had entered the room. He saw that her mouth held a

tight frown and her fingers nervously worked the fringe of the shawl. She was still depressed.

During the last month Colt had fallen in love with her and had tried desperately to win her affection. He had succeeded only in winning her friendship. He wanted Nicole, but he would not force himself upon her. Nicole had to come to him of her own free will or he'd have gained nothing. Jim Coltrane, the gambler, had often taken high risks and won. But in this game he could not jeopardize losing the most precious reward for which he'd ever gambled.

When his fingers touched her shoulder, Nicole started.

"I didn't hear you come in," she said, her voice almost a caress to him.

"I know." Colt sat down beside her on the windowseat. "What were you thinking about?"

Nicole let her eyes travel to the cold city out beyond the window before she spoke. "My future," she said.

Colt shifted uneasily in the seat. He had been afraid of this moment and had tried to prevent it several times, by changing the subject. As he watched Nicole's eyes scan the world outside, he knew that he could no longer turn from the inevitable. "What about your future, Nicole? You know you are welcome to stay here as long as you like."

Nicole met his eyes, her smile a warm appreciation of the friendship he had given her. "I know I can. You have made that clear, Colt. Yet you know I can't keep on living here with you. I have to find some way to support myself. To be my own person. Can you understand that?"

Colt squeezed her hand and then kissed it gently. "I understand, but it doesn't help my feelings. I don't want you to leave."

Nervously, she released his hand and stood up. Her

satin gown rustled against the rug as she began to pace the room. "No, I don't think you do, Colt. I've told you what happened to me, but I did not tell you that I have a husband, nor that he thinks I killed his uncle."

Colt was stunned by the revelation. Damn, he thought, a husband. One small item she failed to mention when she told me she'd lost her baby. And I never even suspected. I assumed she had been someone's mistress. Colt, you fool, you've lived too long near the waterfront. "Are there any more surprises that I need to know, Nicole?"

Nicole saw the bewildered expression on Colt's face and quickly crossed the room. She took his hand in hers, and her eyes begged that he not let this news ruin what there was between them.

"I'm sorry. I should have told you everything, but I had to have time. When I explained to you about my past, you were a stranger to me. I thought it would be best to let you think what you would. It was too humiliating for me to tell a complete stranger that my husband only married me to gain control of a plantation, and that he'd insured control by having me sign over the property to my unborn child. It is a sordid mess, Colt. And now you know. That's the reason I must leave and make my own way. I have a mission, and that is to extract from my husband some recompense for what he's done to me. Can you understand?"

Nicole's last words were spoken with such venom that Colt was shocked. He'd not have thought her capable of holding such hate. She must have been terribly hurt to turn such gentleness to this end. As for the husband's thinking her a murderer—no, that was not possible. He'd never believe that of her.

He put his arms around her and held her close. "I understand, little one. Let me help ease the pain you

feel, and if vengeance is what you want, I'll see to that as well."

She saw the love in his eyes and knew she could never return it. Still, if he could help her to achieve her aim, she would stay. She would also try to show her gratitude through whatever means he chose. With her eyes she accepted his offer while her lips moved gently to touch his.

His embrace tightened about her, and his lips hungrily captured hers.

The response that Colt wished for, and that Nicole hoped for, did not come. Upset with her inability to give herself to him, Nicole pushed herself from Colt's arms and ran to the bed. She threw herself across the soft down mattress and cried, because she couldn't sell herself, even for the revenge that would have been so sweet to her taste. If she ever hoped to exact satisfaction for the wrongs that Alex and Sentelle had perpetrated against her, she'd have to do a lot of things that appalled and repelled her. She knew this well, but could not trade her person to achieve her end. She would then be what Alex had accused her of being, a woman of the streets.

It took Colt a moment to gain control of his emotions. He brushed the hair from his forehead and straightened his jacket before he went to Nicole. Seating himself beside her, Colt said, "Nicole, do you still love him?"

Nicole shook her head vehemently and buried her face deeper into the satin coverlet. "I hate him!" she cried.

But Colt knew better. She still loved the devil who'd hurt her. Damn, why couldn't I just take her and be done with it? he thought. But he knew the answer.

"Hush, now. I understand. Nicole, we are friends, and friends do not have to pay one another for help." He kissed the top of her head.

"I'm sorry, Colt."

With his finger, Colt followed the line of tears, wiping them from her face.

"I know, little one. Now, dry your eyes so we can plan your future."

Colt felt her misery as though it were his own. If it was vengeance she wanted, then he'd make it happen for her. Perhaps then she might find it in her heart to love him.

"My future?" Nicole asked as she dabbed at her eyes with the lace handkerchief she'd pulled from her sleeve. Like the shawl, it was a gift from Colt. Not that he wanted to encourage her crying, he'd said when he offered it, but it reminded him of her in its delicacy and the beauty of its design.

"Tell me what you want," Colt said, "and I'll know what I need to do to help you."

In truth she hadn't a clue as to how to extract her revenge. She'd not really considered it in practical terms. She knew that she wanted retribution—for herself, for her mother, Danielle, for Quinton, and for the child that had never seen life—but how this revenge would be accomplished had not come to her.

Finally Nicole admitted that she didn't know what she wanted of Colt. "I only know I want them both to pay."

Colt laughed. "Both? I thought it was only your husband I had to deal with. Who is the other person?"

Nicole tried but could not say "my father." Sentelle had never been that. "My mother's husband, John Sentelle," she said. "And Alex Chandler, my husband."

Colt's eyes widened, and he let out a long, slow whistle. "Little one, when you set out to have enemies, you seek high. Alex Chandler is one of the richest men in Louisiana, and from what I've heard of the trapper, he's one of the meanest."

"Then you won't help me?"

"Hold on a minute, little one," Colt laughed. "I know Alex Chandler, and it would please me greatly to see him come down a notch or two. He's won far too many card games from me for me not to consider this one fine opportunity to win my own revenge. As for Sentelle, I don't know the man, but if he's hurt you, that's good enough reason for me to deal with him."

Brushing Nicole's curls from her face, Colt said, "Now I think we should go shopping. You will need a few new gowns if we are too succeed."

"New gowns? Why? I have all the gowns I need."

Colt chuckled and pulled her to her feet. "Not if you are going to deal at the Golden Louis. I think, my dear, you will win everything back, and more, from your Alex Chandler. How would you like that?"

"I'd love it," she said, "but how?"

Colt proceeded to tell her of his plan. He prayed it would work. Even if it didn't, Nicole would bring so much business to the Golden Louis it would more than compensate for his losses. Colt knew Chandler to be a gambler at heart, and to game against the woman he hated, Colt surmised, would please the man no end. It would not take long for news of Nicole's position at the Golden Louis to reach her husband, and Colt had no doubt that Nicole would win back her plantation—maybe even her husband's, as well.



CHAPTER 16

Alex lit a cheroot and propped his feet on his desk. It had been over two months since he had left Nicole in New Orleans. After all this time, Alex could not get her out of his mind. He'd kept track of her whereabouts and knew that she now worked for Jim Coltrane at the Golden Louis.

Alex had been tempted on several occasions to go to the gambling house and drag Nicole out of the place by her hair. She was still his wife, and the thought of her working in such surroundings angered him. It was an insult to his pride and to his family name.

Nicole had promised to make him pay for his actions. She'd already succeeded in humiliating him, though it was still a private humiliation. None of his friends knew that the beautiful dealer at Colt's place was his wife. A number of people had mentioned her and urged him to join them at the gambling house. They'd spoken of her beauty and of her expertise at cards. They'd even enjoyed their losses, they'd said. "Was worth every cent to sit across the table

from her," one had told him, all but slobbering over her "voluptuous body," as he put it.

Alex, of course, was furious. But what could he say? He wasn't about to tell the man to stop talking about his wife.

Flicking the cheroot into the cuspidor, Alex made a decision. She was still his wife and he had every right to her. It didn't matter that she was Coltrane's mistress. All he wanted now was her body. Then, perhaps, he could put her from his mind and proceed with the divorce. His mother had urged him to do that immediately after Nicole had left Live Oak.

The Golden Louis was alive with music that came from the piano that stood to one side of the main room. The noise of the crowd and the smoke assaulted Alex. He watched for a few minutes the gambling at the small tables, the scantily clad women scurrying about with trays of drinks as they tried to avoid the seeking fingers of the patrons. He did not see Nicole, but he had not expected that she'd be here in the main room of the club. She would be in the luxuriously appointed back part of the building, where the higher-stake games were played. The average sailor or trapper could not afford to gamble there, where it was not unusual for an entire plantation to change hands on a turn of the card.

Alex now stood on the threshold of Nicole's domain. He spotted her instantly, and was assaulted by her beauty as well as by half a dozen different and contradictory feelings.

Her hair was pulled high with tiny curls that dangled enticingly down one side of her slender neck. The coiffure was elegant and set off the exquisite planes of her face. A tiny gold fleur-de-lis patch touched the corner of her soft lips. He hadn't expected her to look this good. Even her

gown surprised him. He'd expected to see her dressed with the flamboyance of a trollop. Instead she wore a deep burgundy velvet trimmed in delicate lace that showed just enough of her shoulders and breasts to entice, yet left her with the decorous refinement of a lady. He felt himself drawn to her because of her beauty and reserve, and repelled because of all their past history. He wanted to put his arms around her and protect her, and he wanted to destroy her for ever having come into his life. The fact that the men at her table followed not the cards but the grace and poise of her movements disturbed him as well.

And Colt had missed none of this. He'd seen Alex the moment he entered the room and noted each nuance of emotion as it played across Alex's face. It would be easier than he'd thought possible to get things going for Nicole. Colt made his way to Alex's side.

"How good to see you, Alex. Where have you been keeping yourself? I thought you might have lost your appetite for cards."

Alex's eyes were cold, his smile forced. "I've been busy. However, I have had word of your new dealer. I understand she's been quite a success."

"She has indeed. My clients never seem to tire of losing their money to her."

Colt watched Alex's jaw tighten as he spoke. He could feel the tension in Alex like a physical force. Alex Chandler was no gambler this night. Nicole would have her revenge. "Come, I'll introduce you. You might enjoy a game yourself."

Nicole had seen Colt and Alex talking and realized when she heard the laughter in front of her that she'd misjudged the cards and lost a hand. She pulled herself together. The time had come for Colt's plan to be put into action, and she hoped that she was prepared for it. She had

practiced long and hard for the past month, until Colt was satisfied with her performance. He had assured her that she could win back Live Oak, and even Kensington, if she chose. Her fingers moved efficiently over the cards. Colt had taught her every trick she needed to know, though up to now she'd not put them to use. The men who played with her cared little whether they won or lost. Their greed was of a different sort; it had to do with Nicole herself, though they knew that they could do no more than play a game of cards with her.

Nicole steeled herself for the encounter with Alex. Her eyes had not again left the cards until Colt touched her arm to introduce Alex.

"How do you do, sir?" she said. "Would you care to play a game of cards?"

Alex sat down across from Nicole, his smile rigid, his eyes intense. Taking the deck from her, he began to shuffle it. "That's precisely why I'm here. But I would like to ask a favor of Colt." Looking to him, Alex continued, "I would like to play this game alone."

Colt placed a possessive hand on Nicole's shoulder. "It's up to the lady, sir. If she does not mind, then neither do I."

Colt gently caressed the nape of her neck and was not surprised to find Alex's eyes following each movement of his fingers; then he roughly placed the cards before Nicole. She allowed her hand to briefly touch Colt's. "No, I don't mind, if the other gentlemen do not."

There was no way that the other men sitting at the table could not have been aware of the by-play. They all excused themselves from the game. None wanted either Jim Coltrane or Alex Chandler as an enemy.

"Madam, it seems the game is between us."

Nicole appeared agreeable as she began to shuffle the

cards, her fingers deftly rearranging the deck to suit herself. "What shall the stakes be, sir?"

Alex looked at Colt. "There are two things. First, I want this night alone with you, and second, I want the truth on the matter we have spoken of before. I'm sure you understand my meaning."

Nicole nearly dropped the cards. She had not expected such a wager.

She sought Colt's assurance. He squeezed her shoulder and nodded and Nicole, still a bit wary, asked her question. "Sir, what do you wager in return?"

Reaching into his vest pocket, Alex withdrew a stack of bills. "Is five thousand dollars enough to buy you for a night?"

"Sir, you insult me! Five thousand dollars would not buy you the time of day. I have had far grander offers."

The sound of Alex's laughter filled the room. "Then what would it take for you to make the wager?"

Nicole lowered her eyes to keep him from seeing the triumph she could not hide. "Live Oak," she said softly.

Alex reached swiftly across the table and captured Nicole's wrist in a painful grasp. "Live Oak! That's all you've ever wanted, isn't it?"

"You have the lady's answer," Colt said. "If you don't want to take her wager, I would suggest you leave and allow the other gentlemen to play."

Alex saw the deadly look on Colt's face, and the pistol under his coat, and with reluctance he released Nicole's wrist. "You know I don't have to wager for a night with her. By rights she belongs to me. However, I am unarmed and at a disadvantage."

Colt casually placed his hand on the pearl handle of the pistol. "You may be at a disadvantage, sir, but you are no

fool. The lady belongs only to herself, and she has made her choice. I would suggest you accept it."

Alex knew that Colt was right. He was not a coward, but he wasn't a fool either. He would not lose his life over Nicole. He'd wager Live Oak, and when he'd won, he would take her back to that piece of land she so desired. There she could pay for this humiliation.

"Would you be so kind as to bring a piece of paper? I would like all of this to be legal."

"At your service, sir."

As Colt left them, Alex spoke to Nicole, his voice so soft that she had to strain to hear him. "Tonight, my dear wife, you will tell me the truth. Either that or you will not see another sunrise."

Nicole could not speak. She was filled with terror. Should she not win the turn of the card, she would die, because the one thing she could not do, was tell Alex what had transpired the night of Quinton's death.

When Colt returned, he saw how shaken Nicole had become. She was pale, and her hand trembled as she signed her name to the wager. What had Chandler said to her that had so disturbed her? If Alex tried to harm Nicole, he'd see him pay with his life.

Nicole took a deep breath to steady her nerves and picked up the cards. She tensed even more when she saw the cards she had dealt herself. She felt Colt's fingers tighten on her shoulder. She had not stacked the deck correctly. Now only luck would assure the outcome. Alex smiled as he looked at his own cards. A cold sweat broke out on her forehead as she placed her cards face-up before Alex. She closed her eyes, not wanting to see his triumph. She heard Colt's laugh and quickly looked to see Alex staring blankly at the cards. Her pair of tens had beaten his pair of nines.

She had won Live Oak. But her excitement was short-lived, as Alex shoved the cards at her and abruptly stood, toppling his chair. "You have won Live Oak, madame, but I am still your husband."

Colt moved closer to Nicole as though to shield her from Alex, but there wasn't much he could actually do to make the gesture real or in any way free her from Alex. For as long as he remained her husband, he'd have the power to disrupt her life.

"Sir, I would suggest you keep away from Live Oak. It's mine now, the way Quinton wanted it to be, and I'll have you whipped if you ever set foot on it again."

"Such brave words, my dear. Who, may I ask, will do the whipping? I'm sure your lover won't have the time. I suggest you think seriously about what you've actually won."

With those words, Alex turned and disappeared into the crowd.

"Colt," Nicole whispered. "Get me away from here."

He guided her through the crush of onlookers who'd gathered to listen to the exchange. Upstairs in his apartment he shut the door and helped Nicole to a chair. When he'd agreed to participate in the scheme to regain Live Oak for Nicole, he had not known how intense a relationship existed between Alex and her. Now he wasn't sure that he had done the right thing.

"You have your plantation now, my darling, but at what cost?"

"What cost, Colt? What to do you mean?"

"You don't even realize it yourself, do you?"

"Realize what, Colt? I don't understand what you mean."

"You still love the man."

Nicole stared at him, bewildered. "You may not be blind, but you are mad. I hate that man. He hurt me too

much for there ever to be a shred of the love I once had for him. I was just shocked that he'd say what he did. I don't think he'll bother me again, Colt."

"I only hope you're right, Nicole, because tonight ruined any possibility that the two of you will ever be together again."

"I don't want him, Colt. All I want is Live Oak and the power it gives me. No one can ever again treat me the way Alex did. Don't you see? Your plan worked. I *am* free."

Yes, he thought, I gave you your freedom, and now I'll lose you.

Nicole had already forgotten her fear of Alex and a sense of exhilaration washed over her. With Colt's help she had accomplished one of the things she'd set out to do. Now she needed to rid herself of John Sentelle. With the wealth of Live Oak behind her, she'd be able to destroy him. She'd ruin his business and run him from the territory.



CHAPTER 17

The world was renewing itself, and Nicole felt as though she'd just been born. She was home at last. The ground that lay beneath her feet had been tilled by her ancestors, and she would not disappoint them. Live Oak would prosper as it had in the past, and the generations that followed her would be as proud of this land as she was right now.

She felt at last in control of her destiny, her protection, the richness of Live Oak, now hers alone. Colt and the lawyers had arranged everything between her and Alex, and though she'd not heard from Alex since the night at the Golden Louis, she felt sure that she had not seen the last of him. Colt had stayed only long enough to see her settled; then, claiming the need to return to New Orleans because of business, had ridden off.

The soft spring breeze held a chill, and Nicole headed back to the house. She had a great deal to learn about the workings of the plantation, and she might just as well begin. Quinton had taught her some of what she needed to know during the short time they'd been together, but there

were a lot of details still left to absorb before she'd feel totally competent to run Live Oak.

Nicole settled herself behind Quinton's large mahogany desk and pulled the huge leather volume, Live Oak's record book, to her. Soon she had become so engrossed in her work that she forgot about lunch. But Jordan hadn't.

"I thought you might want to eat in here, missy," he said, placing a tray of food on the table near the window.

"Thank you, Jordan. I hadn't realized, but I am hungry. You might have to bring my dinner here as well, if I haven't finished my work by then."

Jordan nodded and quietly left the room. She'd do all right, he thought. It's good to have her back.

She did not stop her work for long and was soon back at the ledger, more fascinating than any book she'd ever read. Every item that pertained to the plantation was recorded, no matter how small, even how much salt it took to cure a ham or how many bales of cotton one field produced.

The afternoon passed swiftly, and Jordan came to light the lamps as day receded into night. Nicole's eyes burned, but she continued to work. She was expecting Jordan with her evening meal, and when she heard the door open she looked up. The man standing in the doorway was not Jordan but Alex.

"What are you doing here?"

"My dear," he said softly, "is that any way for a wife to greet her husband?"

"Get out of my house and off Live Oak. You are not welcome here." The words came easily enough to her lips, but she felt far from confident as she watched Alex move toward her, rapping his riding crop against his hand. His eyes traveled from the top of her head to the tip of her slippers and then back to her face. The light scent of jasmine tempted him as did the tender lips, now held in a firm,

angry line. And then with one swift movement his hands were on her throat, bruising as he pulled her toward him.

Nicole tried to resist but found herself pressed tightly against him, with his mouth savagely capturing hers, his tongue plundering, while remembered sensations awakened her passion. Her arms came to rest about him, and she surrendered herself to the warmth of the moment when, suddenly Alex thrust her from him. His action was so unexpected that Nicole gripped his arm for support causing him to trip over the Oriental rug and they tumbled to the floor. He had wanted only to question her, to draw from her the truth about Quinton's death. But she lay beneath him now, her lips inviting. Her hand reached up to touch his cheek, her eyes filled with longing, and Alex felt himself wrenched asunder. He wanted her and he hated her and he didn't understand his feelings now any more than he had when he'd left her alone in New Orleans. If he could just rid himself of this obsession! His anger surfaced again, as much toward himself as toward her. And he began with trembling hands to strip her of her gown. It was as though a siren had cast a spell and he had no will of his own.

Nicole appeared passive now, though she was anything but that. She wanted Alex as much as he wanted her, and she was in as much torment over her inability to stop the inevitable. She knew that they had come to each other as much in hate as in love. Yet as his lips traveled down her throat to her breasts and down her body, she was filled with sadness about what existed between them, which drew them together and pulled them apart. Their love-making was desperate and intense, tormented by the ghosts of a love they'd thought stilled, yet heated by a passion they could not have thought possible only hours before.

And then it was over, their passion spent, reality fast upon them. Nicole watched Alex adjust his clothing, her

eyes dry and emotionless. She gathered her gown about her and fastened the buttons and went to sit before the fire.

Alex was no less disturbed, and felt himself responsible. He could not bear to see her this way. He poured two brandies and brought one to Nicole. "Drink this," he said, and placed the glass in her hand. He sat down beside her. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

Nicole let her head fall back against the silk cushion and she closed her eyes. He had said the same thing when she lost the baby, but that had not brought a change then, nor would it now. She could not lie to herself any longer. She loved Alex with all her heart. She loved him then and she loved him now and she'd love him forever. But she could not let him know it, because it made her too vulnerable to him.

"Please go, Alex," she said. "Let me live in peace here at Live Oak. Just leave me alone. That's all I ask."

Nicole moved from the fire to the desk, where she picked up the record book. "I have work to finish," she said.

Alex didn't know what to say. He knew that as long as he lived he would not understand her. He turned and walked from the room, and as he rode away from Live Oak, Alex knew that he would never be free of her. Nicole would always be the woman he desired above all others. He'd proved that today. But it would not stop him from continuing to search out all there was to know about how Quinton had died.

Nicole had begun to ride each day across the pastures and meadows of Live Oak. She'd stop at newly turned fields to pick up handfuls of the rich, dark loam and crumble it through her fingers. As her eyes scanned the new ground the pride that Danielle had instilled in her

blossomed forth. She sensed, too, what Quinton felt for Live Oak as she looked at the ground now ready for planting. People were born, and died. They only touched your life briefly, but the land gave sustenance. It nurtured the body and the soul, and as long as she could be here at Live Oak or anywhere close to the earth, she could deal with whatever life had to offer.

She had not seen Alex again and had kept her mind away from that part of her life. Colt had visited several times and had been pleased with the way Nicole was progressing. Her beauty seemed to have intensified during the last months. Her cheeks were a delicate rose and her eyes sparkled. She had also gained weight and had become even more softly alluring than she'd been before. Each time Colt visited it had become harder for him to keep his hands from her.

Three months had passed since Nicole had returned to the plantation, and to everyone here, she seemed always to have lived with them. She accepted her responsibilities with ease and tendered a multitude of decisions as though she'd handled them all of her life.

On a warm morning early in June, Nicole returned from her daily ride, to find the Chandler carriage sitting in the drive. She bridled but forced herself to walk on toward the house.

"Missy, Mistress Chandler has come to visit," Jordan said as he met her at the door.

"Emily? What on earth can she want?" Nicole opened the drawing room door and saw Emily sitting stiff and erect on the divan. She'd not removed either her gloves or her hat, and Nicole could feel the hostility before Emily even opened her mouth. She removed her own hat and laid aside her riding crop.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here when you arrived, but I wasn't

expecting a guest so early in the morning. May I offer you some refreshment?"

Emily's dark eyes shot daggers at Nicole as she seated herself across from her mother-in-law. "I did not come here on a social visit."

"I did not think you had. Wouldn't it be easier just to come to the point?"

"Yes, it would," Emily spat. "I want you to leave Live Oak and never return."

Nicole was speechless at first. The woman's audacity was overwhelming. "Need I remind you that I now own Live Oak?" she said.

"You cheated to get it. You stacked the deck. Alex has told me of his stupid blunder."

"Emily, I will admit that I had *planned* to stack the cards that night. But I didn't do it. The game was honest. Alex gambled and lost. At least I was more honest in the way that I reclaimed Live Oak than you were when you tricked me into signing it away."

"You honest! Alex was heir to Live Oak before you wound Quinton around your conniving little finger. Then you killed him. How does it feel to be a murderer, Nicole?"

Nicole sat up as though stung, her anger emptying all color from her face. "By rights Live Oak should have been mine in the beginning. Quinton knew that. He was only trying to right the wrong done so many years before. Emily, I will tell you as I have told your son, I did not kill Quinton. I loved him. He was the only person on this earth, apart from my mother, who was kind to me."

Emily laughed, a cold metallic sound filling the room. "Loved Quinton! Like you loved my son! You are no better than your mother. She was a tramp even when she was just a girl, always chasing after Quinton. But when

she realized that she could not have him, she ran away with the trapper.”

Nicole had had enough. She stood and pointed to the door. “Emily, I would suggest you leave now, before I have you thrown from the premises. Your family has cost me dearly, and I am determined not to let any of you hurt me again. My baby lies buried in the cemetery because of your son. Now, get out of my house and don’t you ever come here again.”

Emily gathered her reticule, draped her shawl about her shoulders, and turned to leave. “Nicole, you will not keep Live Oak. You killed Quinton to get it, and you are going to pay for it—one way or another!”

“Emily, I have already paid dearly,” Nicole said, her tone so deadly it halted Emily in her tracks. “My child is dead. Now, get off my property. And if you ever show yourself here again, you’ll regret it!”

Emily fled, convinced, finally, that threats would prove useless against this woman. But she vowed to return to Live Oak one day, once she’d driven Nicole from its soil.

The facade of strength that Nicole had kept in place all during Emily’s visit slipped, and she allowed the deep pain to surface. Will they never leave me in peace? she wondered. Aren’t they satisfied with the damage they’ve already done? The words of her conversation with Emily went around and around in her mind. Her happiness, it seemed, hung together by a very fine cord. It took a Chandler very little time to cut it and expose the wounds beneath.

Colt found Nicole still sitting in the drawing room and knew immediately that something had happened, despite her efforts to hide what she felt. Then she ran from the room, barely making the front veranda, before she lost her breakfast.

Colt had followed her and offered his handkerchief as he seated her in the high-back rocker. "What's wrong?" he asked. He placed his hand on her forehead to check her temperature. "You don't seem to have a fever."

She looked up at Colt and for the first time faced the truth of her situation. When she'd first missed her monthly flow, Nicole had thought it the result of her activities at the plantation, the constant riding. Now, in the third month, she could no longer deny that she was pregnant.

Nicole knew that Colt loved her and she also knew how it would hurt him to know of her condition. Still, he was her friend, her only friend, except for the Baileys, and he had a right to know.

She had forced the night of Alex's visit from her mind, never even told Colt of it, because she feared she'd tell him all. Up to now there hadn't been a need to tell him. Nothing would have been accomplished except to cause him pain.

She caressed his face and Colt took her hand and kissed her palm. He was a dear, tender man, and she wished with all her heart that it was he she loved.

"I'm not ill, Colt," she said at last. "I'm pregnant."

"Pregnant?" Colt turned away from her. "What a fool I've been," he said. "How could you do this, Nicole? You never even said you'd been seeing another man."

"Colt, it's Alex's," she said simply.

"Chandler's? I was right all the time. I should have known when you came back here you'd go to him."

"Colt, you don't understand. It's not like that. He came here one evening and . . ." She could not go on, but threw herself into his arms, unable to stop her sobs.

He held her close, feeling a sense of relief that mingled with a growing anger.

Colt moved Nicole away from him and studied her face. "Why hadn't you told me before?"

Nicole wiped her eyes, impatient with the constant flow of tears that filled her life. She bore as much responsibility as Alex in what had happened and she needed to face the truth, as painful as it was for her and for Colt.

She knew that she loved Alex, but she knew, as well, that they would never be together. She didn't trust him—or was it herself? Whatever, Colt had to know that her pregnancy was the result of a single night's madness. And she told him of the anger and of her own weakness.

"I cannot expect that you forgive me after all you have done for me, but I do ask that you understand. It's over between us," she said. "We've destroyed forever what it was that drew us together."

Colt turned from her again. The scent of roses permeated the air, and their sweetness sickened him. He was shaken by what she'd said. He'd known all along of the feelings between Alex and Nicole. They did love each other, but they were too hurt and too stubborn to admit it. He guessed he could never compete with Alex for her love, and it pained him. There was something else he saw. The three months at Live Oak had worked a change on Nicole. She was stronger now, and he felt she'd gained the ability to fight her own battles. Nicole did not need him in the way she had before. She didn't need a protector. But she did need a friend, and he always would be that.

"Are you going to tell Alex about the child?" he asked.

Nicole felt a certain discomfort about what she was about to say. It wasn't totally fair to Alex, she knew. "No. It's my child, and I shall not let Alex take it from me."

"It's his child also, Nicole. A child needs a father as well as a mother, and a man has a right to his child."

"No! Alex has no rights—not with Live Oak *or* with this child. If there is any way possible, he will never know of it."

"Then divorce him and marry me, Nicole."

Nicole could not meet his eyes. Colt was offering her his heart, but she could not accept it. "I can't, Colt."

Standing, he took Nicole's hand in his. "Nicole, you know I love you, and if you ever change your mind, I'll be waiting."

Nicole was filled with gratitude and sadness. How good it would be if she loved him the way he loved her. "You know I love you, Colt, and treasure you for the friend you are. I would not be standing here with you if you hadn't come into my life. You're very special to me, Colt."

"Well," he said in an effort to lighten the moment, "if I can't be the baby's father, maybe you will let me be his uncle."

"That would please me greatly, Uncle Colt." Nicole put her arm around his waist, and they walked into the house.



CHAPTER 18

Colt bounded up the stairs and, when Jordan came to the door, asked him where Nicole was.

"She's in the library, sir. If you will wait here, I'll inform her of your presence."

"I'll inform her myself," Colt said, and he rushed past the butler. He'd received a message from Nicole asking him to come immediately. She needed his help.

But as Colt opened the oak door to the library, he was surprised to find Nicole sitting demurely behind the large desk, studying the records. He'd expected anything but the calm atmosphere that pervaded the room. "Nicole, you nearly frightened me to death. I expected to find you on your deathbed, from your message."

Nicole looked up, her face calm and radiant. "I am sorry, Colt, if I frightened you. I didn't mean for you to take my message so literally."

Colt walked to the liquor cabinet and poured himself a drink. He needed a release from the tension of the last few

hours, during which he'd conjured up every disaster possible to have overtaken Nicole.

"Well, what is so important that you needed me immediately?"

"Colt, what would I do without you?" Nicole laughed when Colt withdrew from his pocket a white linen handkerchief to mop his forehead.

"I don't know, little one. Now, out with it. What's so urgent?"

"I want you to help me find John Sentelle."

"I thought you'd forgotten about that."

"I haven't forgotten. I was only waiting for the right moment. Sentelle should be back in the territory by now to sell his winter catch."

"Nicole, forget about Sentelle. You have had your revenge on Chandler and you will have your child. Forget this vendetta before it destroys you and everything you hold dear."

"I can't, Colt. I can never be happy until I know Sentelle has paid for what he did to my mother and me." Nicole held up her hand to stop Colt's next words. "He will pay, Colt, and if you won't help me, I'll just get someone else to do it."

It was useless to argue with her. This was a new Nicole, staunchly proud and with a will of her own. Nothing he could say would make a difference.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"I want you to circulate the message to all buyers not to trade with Sentelle. If he can't sell his catch, then he can't afford to remain in the area. Do you think you can do that?"

"What if Sentelle doesn't leave, Nicole? What then? He's a dangerous man, and if he thinks you are behind all this, he will be out for your blood."

NICOLE LA BELLE

Nicole had thought of all the possibilities. There were guards already on watch at the plantation. She didn't want any more unexpected visitors—her mother-in-law, her husband, or Sentelle. "I'll be all right, Colt. If Sentelle ever comes here again, he will regret it. Now, how much do you think it will cost?"

"Nicole, I'm afraid your revenge will cost you more than you ever dreamed. It will ruin your life if you let it."

From the window of the library the cemetery was visible. Nicole waved her hand in the direction of the marble headstones. "Colt, Sentelle is responsible for two lives that lie beneath Live Oak's soil. They are buried in the family plot along with their ancestors. My mother lies buried in the swamp, and he is the reason for her death as well. Can't you understand why I want vengeance?"

Colt admired her determination. If Sentelle had committed only a small part of what she'd said he had, he deserved punishment. He knew he would do the same in her place. But he loved Nicole, and he was concerned for her safety.

As the weeks passed, life grew within Nicole and finally made it impossible for her to continue her rides on Honey. Instead, she began using a small woven cart for her excursions about the plantation. The summer heat increased, as did her size, and Nicole began to seek the cooler areas of the plantation. Lately she had begun to come to the grape arbor, where Quinton had taken her so long ago. There was always a gentle breeze stirring beneath the vines. It was pleasant to sit on the soft tufts of grass and listen to the bubbling spring.

This afternoon, Nicole could feel the perspiration beading her forehead as she pulled the cart to a halt before the entrance to the arbor. She retrieved the book of verse from

the back of the cart and climbed down. She settled herself against the trunk of a tree and began to read.

The sound of water blocked out the soft footsteps that had followed her so that she was unaware of anyone's presence.

"So, you are to be a mother again."

Nicole looked up to see Alex towering over her. When she tried to get to her feet Alex's hand stopped her.

"Don't get up."

She remained seated, not wanting to tempt fate by rousing his anger.

"What do you want?"

Alex hunkered down beside her and pulled up a blade of grass. "I just wanted to see if what I had heard was true. I see it is. It didn't take Coltrane long to breed you, did it?"

Nicole closed her eyes, afraid Alex would see the relief his words had brought to her. He did not think it his child she carried. "Now you have your answer," she said, looking at him again to see a strange expression, not unlike one of pain, briefly cross his face.

"Were you going to tell everyone the child was a Chandler?" he said, angry now.

Nicole shook her head, pride and pain warring inside her. "No, Alex. The child I carry is mine."

"Won't the bastard marry you?" he said, something of a taunt in his voice.

"Alex, you know that's out of the question. You haven't divorced me."

"And I won't."

"Alex, please. Divorce me and let us both live in peace."

"No, Nicole, Coltrane will never own Live Oak—or you."

* * *

Emily Chandler had clenched her fist as she watched her son enter the grape arbor. She knew his intention. She had followed him each day for the past week on his visits to Live Oak and watched from a distance the way he did as Nicole went about the plantation. Today, however, he'd spoken with her.

Emily had tried for the past months to get Alex to pursue some course of action against Nicole, but without success. Until he had learned of her pregnancy the previous week, he would not even discuss the situation with his mother. Emily had seen the pained expression in his eyes when he heard the news from one of the servants. Her hatred for Nicole intensified with the knowledge that her son's fresh suffering had come about because of her. When Nicole had not taken her warning seriously, Emily had determined that she'd rid herself and Alex of the woman one way or another.

When Alex had gone, Emily stealthily made her way through the tall grass to the cart. Her eyes shifted nervously toward the arbor to make certain that she was unobserved. Then she slipped a small knife from her pocket of her riding habit and loosened the bolts on the shafts of the cart. When she was satisfied with her handiwork, she eased forward. She did not want to disturb the horse. She patted it and whispered soothingly so that it would not make a sound, and began to cut the leather traces. She did not cut them completely through, not wanting them to give way too soon. Only after the cart was in motion and some resistance was placed on the trace would it break and free the horse from its harness.

Emily was pleased with what she had done and quickly slipped back through the trees to where she had left her horse.

* * *

Nicole trembled as she made her way to her feet and leaned against the trunk of the tree. She had tried to remain calm during Alex's tirade but had failed. She was relieved that he believed the baby to be Colt's, but at the same time hurt that he thought this. It kept coming back to Live Oak. All he'd ever wanted was the plantation, and he was determined to make her life miserable until his desire became fact.

Well, she had as much as or more determination than he. She'd keep what she owned. Live Oak was hers by right, and if necessary, she would fight for it till her death.

"All I want is to be left alone, Mr. Chandler," she'd said. "Why do you and your mother persist in torturing me?"

An insulting smile on his face, his eyes traveled over her swollen belly. "Because, my dear wife, we know you for what you are." That said, Alex bowed and left the arbor.

If he'd slapped Nicole's face, her pain could not have been greater. The outside world had finally intruded and this arbor, which had been a place of beauty and quiet, would never again be the same for her. She would never be able to come here without being reminded of Alex Chandler's hatred of her.

Nicole bent to pick up the book of verse, and her eyes scanned the page she'd been reading. It held a love sonnet. Grimly she closed the book. Love, as the poets wrote of it, was not real, or at least not real for her. But she would survive. Alex Chandler was not dealing with one of his fine New Orleans ladies who would so easily succumb to pressure. She'd survived John Sentelle and the swamps and she'd survive this. She'd continue to protect the secrets of the past.

Anxious to be home, Nicole slapped impatiently at the

reins and the horse vaulted, nearly unseating her. She pulled sharply to slow him, but the frightened animal had taken the bit between his teeth and the cart careened down the road, out of control.

The bolts gave way and the harness slipped from the staves. The leather broke and the horse ran free, jerking the reins from her hands and nearly dragging Nicole from her seat. When the wheel of the cart hit a large stone in its path, Nicole felt it begin to tip and jumped from the vehicle just before it overturned.

She broke her fall with her hands and rolled to her side to protect the baby. She lay sprawled on the ground for some time before she regained her breath and assessed the damage. The baby gave a sharp kick and Nicole realized that her child was unharmed. She sat up and dusted off her torn garments. Beyond her battered hands and knees, she was not injured.

The full implication of the incident did not hit Nicole until she had walked nearly halfway back to the house. When she realized how close she had come to dying, she trembled from head to toe. It was in this state that Jordan found her, white-faced and in shock.

He immediately took charge of the situation and quickly got her back to Live Oak. He'd been frantic with worry when her horse had returned, and he had set out in search of her. When he found her unharmed, his face relaxed into a grateful smile. Now, as he helped her into the house and saw her pallor, the worry returned. He ordered her maid, Betsy, to help Nicole with a hot bath, and he sent a snifter of brandy along with the hot water. Jordan also helped himself to a brandy as well, to steady his nerves before returning to the scene of the accident to try to find out what had caused the near-fatal difficulty with the cart.

Having drunk the brandy, Nicole relaxed in the tub.

Until now, she had not been able to think rationally about what had happened. Now her mind began to sift through the events of the afternoon, and it struck her that Alex might have been responsible for what had happened. She could not think it possible that he would have tried to murder her. Not the Alex that she had known. But did she truly know the man she had married? Somehow, she suspected, if he intended to do away with her, he'd strangle her with his own bare hands before he'd sneak around and arrange an accident.

After she was bathed and dressed, Nicole sent Betsy to find Jordan and have him join her in the library. If what she imagined was true, she had to have proof of it.

Jordan was waiting at the foot of the stairs, and he followed her silently into the library. She seated herself at the desk and Jordan placed several pieces of leather before her.

She paled at the sight of them. The leather was new, Jordan reported, so it hadn't torn. "It's been cut with a knife," he said.

Nicole picked up the piece of harness and ran her finger over the straight edges. It took only a moment for her to realize the import of what she saw.

"Thank you, Jordan. That will be all for now."

When the door closed, Nicole leaned her elbows on the desk and wept. Alex had tried to murder her.



CHAPTER 19

Emily Chandler decided to forgo her yearly excursion into New Orleans. All of the other planters and their families had moved to the city, now that Indian summer had set in, to enjoy the festivities of the coming season. But Emily's need to see her daughter-in-law driven from Live Oak grew daily until it choked off any sane thoughts she might have had.

Alex did not see the change that had come over his mother, so engrossed was he in his own misery. He left Kensington only when business took him to New Orleans. He had no heart for anything since his last encounter with Nicole. To ease his turmoil he'd mount his horse and ride wildly about Kensington, allowing the wind to beat at him, as though it could drive the image of Nicole from his mind.

Nicole, too, had remained on the plantation. She sat this day in a high-back rocker, contemplating the dusty dark green foliage of the trees. The day was hot and humid and without a breeze. Every inch of her light muslin gown felt

plastered to her. Her pregnancy had advanced rapidly, and the extra weight nearly stifled her. The enforced idleness irked her as well, since she no longer had even the pleasure of her rides about Live Oak. Her near brush with death had ended that recreation for her. She could not take the chance of losing her child.

The servants kept to themselves and only made conversation when asked. Nicole needed a companion. Her only friend was Colt, and lately his visits had been infrequent. Nicole longed for someone in whom she could confide her fears and her joy about the coming baby.

She thought about Emma a lot these days. They had been writing to each other since Nicole had returned to Live Oak, but Nicole had not yet told her about the break with Alex. She had mentioned the loss of her first baby and her current pregnancy. Emma and Sam were delighted with the news, particularly Emma, who so loved children. After the baby came she wanted to have them visit. Then there was time enough to tell them the rest, she thought.

Nicole's gaze lingered on the parched lawn and her thoughts returned to Colt. His words on the day he agreed to help her to find Sentelle were always at the back of her mind: *What cost do you pay to own Live Oak?* A cost of loneliness, she thought. I have no one at my side, and now even you have deserted me.

The sound of hoofbeats intruded upon her and she saw the rider come up the drive. It was Colt. She might even believe in the magic of thoughts, if she were a superstitious sort.

Nicole ran down the steps as fast as her ungainly body would let her. "I'm so glad you've come," she said even before he'd dismounted.

They hugged and kissed, and Colt slipped his arm around

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her waist to escort her back to the veranda. "Now, that's the kind of greeting I like, little one."

Colt noticed Nicole's dejected expression as he seated himself beside her. He cupped her chin within his hand, his eyes serious. "What's wrong, little one? Are you ill?"

Nicole smiled as she tried to hide the depression she felt. "No, I was just lonely. You haven't been to visit for some time."

"Nicole, let me take you back to New Orleans. You would be safe at the Golden Louis."

"You know I can't travel in my condition, even if I wanted to go to New Orleans. Why are you worried about my safety? I have guards posted at all times."

"The business with Sentelle has been accomplished. Everything is as you would have it. He's been unable to sell his furs. But he knows who is responsible for his ruin. I'm afraid for your life, if you remain here. Either Sentelle or Chandler will harm you. Come back to New Orleans with me today, please."

"Colt, dear Colt, there is nothing for you to worry about. I am well protected. I'll be as safe at Live Oak as I would in New Orleans."

"Nicole, you don't seem to understand. If either of these men wants to harm you, there is nothing that will prevent him from doing so. Think of your child, Nicole."

He could see by the look on her face that it was useless to argue any further. Colt threw up his hands. "I want to be here to protect you, but I can't. And I'm afraid for you, Nicole."

"I understand how you feel, Colt, and I thank you. But this is my home, and I want my baby to be born here, on the land that will one day be his—or hers. Please understand."

He did, really, but that didn't stop his concern for her.

The rest of Colt's visit was spent pleasantly as he told

Nicole about what was happening in the city. As they sat and chatted on the veranda, Emily Chandler sat on her horse at the top of the hill, looking down at the house. She had come every day to the thickly forested area to watch Nicole's movements, undetected by the guards.

She might have failed in her first attempt to rid herself of Nicole, but Emily was determined that she'd not fail the next time. The woman had taken from her everything she had ever loved, even her son. Alex was still in love with Nicole. Despite all of her efforts to make Alex see the woman for what she was, she could see in his eyes that he'd not been touched by her arguments. He refused even to speak of it with her. Alex had changed since Nicole had become pregnant. He rarely smiled, was moody and silent, and showed little interest in the pleasantries of life.

You'll pay, she thought. You'll pay, my dear Nicole.

Suddenly a hand covered Emily's mouth and jerked her from the saddle.

When her assailant turned her to face him, his eyes widened in surprise. "You're not Nicole! Who are you?"

Emily couldn't speak until he removed his hand, which he promised to do, if she'd not scream. "If you do, you'll not live a moment longer," he said.

Emily was shaken, but managed to tell him her name. "And who are you?"

"So, you're the bitch's mother-in-law."

Emily looked puzzled, until she realized to whom he'd made reference. "You mean Nicole Chandler?" She'd been so shocked when he'd pulled her from the horse that she had disregarded his having called her Nicole.

The man still held Emily's arm, so when she said Nicole's name, his fingers bit into her flesh as he acknowledged her question.

She cringed in pain but made no sound. She wanted no

one to know of her presence at the top of the hill. "Who are you, and what do you want with Nicole?" Emily asked.

"I'm John Sentelle and I plan to kill the bitch. But not before I take care of you."

"You don't understand. I'm not about to warn her; I hate her that much."

Sentelle didn't believe her. "You're her mother-in-law," he said, incredulous.

Emily looked at him closely. She could use his help. She hadn't been able to think of another plan since her previous failure. He was impatient, she noticed, and irritated, so she'd best explain herself to him. Quickly she sketched the details and concluded, "I hate her even more than you do. Why do you think I was up here spying on her today? I want her off Live Oak in any way possible. Her death would not unduly disturb me."

Sentelle released Emily's hand and said, "Let's ride away from here to some quiet place where we can discuss how we can be of mutual benefit."

Emily's face brightened. He wasn't too bad-looking, she decided. His coarseness was appealing once she knew that they were of the same mind. Quinton had been far too refined, she decided.

Emily directed Sentelle to a shack that sat along the boundaries of Live Oak and Kensington. They dismounted and entered the dim interior. Sentelle kicked the door shut and leaned against it, surveying the woman. She was excited, all right. Damn, if I couldn't lay the bitch if I were able, he thought. All them fancy ladies are the same. All of 'em got hot britches. Just like Danielle.

"Now, little lady, why don't you just sit down there and tell me what you had in mind," Sentelle said as he pointed to a rickety chair.

Emily seated herself with aplomb. "It seems, sir, that we are set on the same course. I for one want Nicole dead, so my son and I will get what is rightfully ours. I want Live Oak. But tell me, what is your reason for wanting the baggage out of the way?"

And Sentelle told her of his ruin. "I may have to go elsewhere and start fresh," he said, "but I want her to pay for what she's done. I'll at least have that satisfaction."

"Monsieur Sentelle, I think we can work together on this. And you will become a richer man for it, too."

"That suits me fine, Madame Chandler."



CHAPTER 20

Nicole sat in the library, the only sound, apart from the crackling fire, the ticking of the china clock on the marble mantel. The servants had retired to their quarters, and she leaned her forehead against the cool pane of glass and suppressed a shudder. She turned from the window and moved about nervously. She knew that it was mad to let her imagination take control, but she could not stop the chill of fear that crept up her spine. Her eyes sought each shadow in the oak-paneled room to assure herself that she was safe. She was being foolish, she decided at length, and settled herself in the large leather armchair. She propped her ankles on the footstool, picked up a volume of verse, and leafed absently through it, still uneasy despite her efforts to remain calm.

Nicole knew that the anxiety she felt stemmed from her condition and the loneliness that had invaded Live Oak these past months. A sharp kick assured her that she was not completely alone and that time would take care of her predicament.

When Colt had last visited she'd expressed a desire for female companionship and her wish to see the Baileys. He had immediately suggested that he go to Cottersville and bring the Baileys back to Live Oak for an extended visit. She had expected to invite them, anyway, after the baby's birth, and it would ease his mind to know that Nicole was not alone. He had been gone for several weeks now and Nicole expected him any day.

Nicole had already begun making plans for herself and her new family. She could not think of Sam and Emma in any other way. They were the only people with whom she felt a kinship. She knew that Colt loved her and that she loved him in a very special way, but it was not the same as having the support of her family. She was sure, she kept telling herself, that everything would be fine once the Baileys arrived and her child was born. But she knew, if she was really honest with herself, that there would still be something missing: the love she had shared with Alex. She remembered often these days the brief time of happiness they had shared when they had come to Live Oak. But she was sure that Alex never loved her, and even if she had felt free to reveal to him her true relationship to Quinton, it wouldn't have changed anything.

Nicole became impatient with herself. These maudlin ruminations solved nothing and only caused her grief. But why couldn't she stop the memories from flooding in?

A shadow fell across Nicole, startling her. The book she'd been holding clattered to the floor as a hand descended over her mouth. John Sentelle stood over her, bold and very real.

"Thought you'd get away with it, Miss High-and-Mighty? Thought you could drive me away that easy? You should have known better than that."

Sentelle jerked her from the chair, and Nicole instinctively moved her hand to protect the life she carried.

“You ain’t going to protect your bastard. When you die, he dies. But that won’t be for a while yet. I got some plans for you first.”

Her first reaction had been fear, but something in her would not allow him to kill either her or her offspring.

Perhaps if she pretended to faint, she could catch him off-guard long enough for her to find a weapon. The ruse worked momentarily and she was able to free herself long enough to grab the fire poker, which she aimed at his head. But Sentelle managed to deflect the blow with his shoulder and then began to stalk her as she moved about the room. It wasn’t long before he had her trapped in a corner of the library and had twisted the metal rod from her grasp and knocked her to the floor.

“Bitch,” he said as he bound her wrists and ankles with several leather strips. He stuffed her mouth with a rag so filthy that she nearly gagged, then picked her up and strode from the house and into the woods. He’d hidden his horse there earlier, after he’d killed the guard, and now tossed Nicole into the saddle. Sliding on behind her, he headed for the shack.

When they arrived Sentelle dragged her from the saddle and into the building. He didn’t say a word to her, nor did he light a candle.

In the long, dark night, Nicole thought how sad it was that she and Alex could not have mended their differences, and that she’d never see her child born. Then she slept, so soundly that she didn’t hear the horse that approached as dawn turned the sky to stormy gray, nor the voices that came after.

Sentelle watched Emily slide from the saddle. He was still amazed that a woman who looked so much the lady could plan so violent a crime without so much as a blink of

an eye. They would have made a good pair but for that Indian blade.

"Did it go well?" Emily asked as he met her at the door.

He swung the door wide so she could view what was inside.

"That's what you been hankering for, ain't it?" he said.

"Yes. You didn't kill her, did you? I told you to wait."

"No, she ain't dead. Just restin' a spell."

Emily seated herself on the rickety chair, smoothed the soft velvet of her riding habit, and settled in to await Nicole's return to consciousness. Before she let Sentelle destroy her, Emily was determined to hear the truth from her lips about Quinton's death. Then, as she watched Nicole take her last breath, her revenge would be complete.

"What you waiting for? She's here now. Why don't you just slit her throat and be done with it?"

"I want her to know that I'm the one who made her pay for what she's done. You still get your gold, no matter how long it takes."

Sentelle rolled the wad of tobacco in his jaw and leaned against the wall. "Yep, she's done some pretty rotten things to me, but what's she done to you?"

"It's none of your concern to know my reasons," Emily said.

"You're just like the rest of them rich folks," he said. "Always looking down your nose at us. You and Danielle, and the one over there—you're all the same. Even that damn Quinton DuPree thought he was better than every one else. He did, until I told him a few of the facts of life."

"What do you know of Quinton DuPree? He was one of

the kindest people who ever lived. You're not good enough to clean the manure from his stables."

"Not good enough," he said. "At least I wasn't going to marry my own daughter!"

Emily could not believe she'd heard him right. "His own daughter? You mean Nicole was Quinton's daughter?"

"So you didn't know?" Sentelle still smarted from her insult, but it gave him pleasure to be the one to tell her the truth about one of her own kind. "Quinton and Danielle were lovers, and I was fool enough to marry her. I always suspected it, but until I found Danielle's note, I couldn't be certain."

Was he telling her the truth? Emily wondered. It couldn't be true. It couldn't be. . . . "What note are you talking about?" she asked.

Sentelle reached within his pocket and retrieved a yellowed, crumpled piece of paper. He threw it onto Emily's lap. "Read that and you'll know. Danielle meant for it to go to Quinton." Sentelle did not tell Emily the reason it had taken him so long to come forward with such information. On the morning he had found Danielle's note he had laid it on the kitchen shelf and had forgotten about it. It was only after he had made his way back south to recuperate from the wounds the Indians had inflicted on him that he had again picked up the piece of paper. He had never learned to read very well, and it had taken time for him to decipher its message. When he did he started making plans on how to use it. It was just by luck that he had heard of Quinton and Nicole's upcoming marriage and decided to put Danielle's note to use.

With trembling fingers Emily unfolded the note and read Danielle's last request.

* * *

My darling Quinton,

My love for my dearest cousin still exists after all these years. Time has played many tricks upon the two of us, but the years of our youth remain a treasured memory. When you read this I will have found my peace. I pray you will comfort my daughter in her grief and give her all that she has been denied by my foolishness. May God forgive me for it. Please love her as I have loved her—as your daughter. Your cousin, Danielle.

Emily was overwhelmed by the magnitude of what lay in her hands. Nicole was Quinton's daughter. What agony and humiliation he would have felt at finding out about their relationship. It would be enough to cause anyone to commit suicide. "Did you show this to Quinton?" she asked Sentelle.

"Yes, I showed it to him, but he wouldn't pay me to keep it quiet. On the night before he was to marry her, he had the nerve to refuse to pay me. Too good to let me blackmail him. Said he would face the world with the fact. Said nothing happened between the two that they should be ashamed of. But I showed him."

"What do you mean?" You showed him?"

"What I said. The high-and-mighty DuPree threatened to have me arrested for blackmail, but he didn't live to see it happen. A bullet through his head stopped any such notions," Sentelle boasted.

She had been about to kill an innocent woman, the woman her son so desperately loved. Emily closed her eyes, and her mind filled with all of the wretched things she had done to Nicole and how close she'd come to being that which she'd accused Nicole of being. And then she

looked at Sentelle, the man responsible for it all. She screamed, waking Nicole, who now watched as her mother-in-law rained blows on Sentelle.

Nicole struggled to free herself so that she could help Emily, but her bonds would not give. She had to sit by helplessly and watch the scene of horror as it played itself out before her.

Sentelle, at first taken by surprise by the assault, soon began to strike at Emily with his fists. She was knocked across the cabin, to land against the the rough, splintered wall. Stunned for a moment by the impact of his blows, she recovered and began again to attack. Sentelle was by now enraged, and he struck Emily hard in the mouth. She slumped, but he would not let her fall. He kept on hitting her about the head as he tangled his fingers in her long hair and held her erect and continued to batter her. Nicole watched in horror as he finally let her fall to the floor. He kept on kicking her until her face became unrecognizable pulp.

Tears of helpless rage streamed from Nicole's eyes as Sentelle savagely mutilated Emily's body. The woman had never been kind to Nicole, but she would not have wished so vile an end for her. She was Alex's mother and she was the grandmother of the child Nicole now carried. Her own wrists were bleeding from her efforts to free herself, and she was overcome with grief for Emily. Nothing could help her now. Sentelle had killed her.

As the red haze began to clear, Sentelle gazed down at the still, battered figure. Shrugging his shoulders, he said, "To hell with you and the gold. I got what I came after."

Wiping the blood from his boot on the velvet of Emily's riding habit, Sentelle turned once more to Nicole. She struggled against him as he picked her up and carried her to his horse. Placing her in the saddle and climbing up

behind her, he spat a stream of tobacco juice in the direction of the shack. "This is what I wanted, bitch. She'll make good alligator bate." Turning his horse in the direction of the swamp, Sentelle left Live Oak.



CHAPTER 21

Colt reined in the horses in front of the house and was immediately confronted with guards and servants, all talking at the same time and anxious to tell him what had happened.

Exasperated, Colt shouted for them to hold their tongues. "Now, Jordan, do you think you can explain what's going on here. Where is Mrs. Chandler? Is she all right?"

"No, sir. Miss Nicole's gone. Someone cut Rett's throat last night and took her away. No one heard a thing."

Before he could begin to think about what to do, the Baileys arrived. He'd come on ahead in the buckboard with their luggage so they could have a more comfortable ride in the carriage.

"She's missing," Colt told Sam and Emma, "and one of the guards was killed. I knew she was in danger, but damn me, I allowed her to convince me she could stay on here alone."

Emma put her arms around Colt. "We'll find her, I know we will." She and Sam had met Colt for the first

time when he'd come to them with Nicole's invitation along with a letter that finally explained the whole situation to them. It hadn't been easy to absorb so quickly all that had happened, but they had, and they saw in Colt a decency they could admire, as well as his concern for the young woman they had grown to love.

Colt decided that there was only one place Nicole could be, and that was with Chandler. He took out his pistol and checked. "If I'm right about this, Chandler's a dead man!"

At this point, Sam knew that he ought to intervene. He wasn't sure that all that Nicole and Colt thought about Alex could be true. There was a lot that was being misunderstood. "I'll go with you," he told Colt.

"I can do this alone. And if I find that he's hurt Nicole, there is nothing under the sun that will save him."

Then it was Emma who tried to stop him, but Sam pulled her back. He realized that he'd have to let happen what would. They'd have to work it out for themselves. "Emma, there are certain things a man has to do," he said. "There is nothing that I, or anyone else, can do to stop him at this moment."

Colt reined in the lathered horse in front of Kensington's manor house and moved quickly to pound on the door. A petite black girl answered, and Colt pushed past her into the foyer. "Chandler!" he called. "Where are you?"

"Please, sir, Mr. Chandler is still asleep," the girl said as she tried to block Colt's path up the stairs.

"Out of my way, girl. I don't give a damn if he's up or not. I'll get him up!" Colt pushed her aside and strode up the stairs.

But Alex was awake. He'd heard the shouting all the way upstairs and had managed to slip on his dressing gown

before his bedroom door crashed open and Colt walked in, his pistol leveled at Alex's heart.

"Where's Nicole?" Colt demanded.

Alex looked from the gun to Colt, his anger aroused at the sight of his wife's lover. The agony of knowing these past months that Nicole carried this man's child blotted out the reality of the gun, and he instinctively moved forward.

"I wouldn't come any closer if I were you, Chandler. You don't know how easy it would be for me to pull the trigger. I've longed for just this for quite some time. You've mistreated Nicole for the last time. But before I kill you, I want to know where you have taken her."

"What in hell are you talking about, Coltrane? I've done nothing with Nicole."

"Do you expect me to believe that, after all you have done to her? I know you'd stop at nothing to get Live Oak away from her. I wouldn't put murder past you. Now, I want the truth, or you're a dead man where you stand." Colt pulled the hammer back on the pistol.

"Coltrane, would you at least have the courtesy to tell me what you're talking about before you kill me?" Alex took another step forward.

"You're tempting fate, Chandler. You damn well know what I'm talking about. Nicole has disappeared and you're the son-of-a-bitch who kidnaped her and killed one of her guards."

When the impact of Colt's words hit him, Alex knew that he had little time to stand and argue. He had to make clear his innocence. "Colt, why would I kill one of her guards? If I wanted Nicole, all I'd have to do is go to Live Oak and take her. Perhaps you've forgotten, but I am still her husband and I have that right."

Colt suddenly realized that Alex was telling the truth. He lowered the pistol. "If you didn't take her, who did?"

Alex grabbed his britches and began to pull them on. "I don't know, Colt."

"Do you have any idea about who might want to harm her?"

The first thought to cross Alex's mind was "Mother," and he quickly finished dressing. She had ranted and raved so often about Nicole. Emily had tried to involve him in several schemes to rid them of her. When he had finally told her that he would have nothing to do with her plans, Emily had become withdrawn and secretive. She had begun to take long rides about the plantation, and Alex had thought they were doing her some good. Only last evening, he'd commented on that fact during dinner. His mother had seemed happy for the first time in months.

Colt watched as Alex dressed and sensed that he was keeping something from him. His anger and suspicions grew once more, and he raised his gun. "Chandler, you know more than you're telling me. I'm warning you. You had better tell me what you know."

Alex pulled on his boots and strode to the door. "Mother is the only person that I know who would want something to happen to Nicole."

Colt followed Alex down the hall to Emily's bedroom. There was no answer when he knocked, and he opened the door, to find his mother's maid making up the canopied bed. "Where is Miss Emily?" he asked.

"She gone riding early this morning, sir."

"Susie, which way did she go?"

"She always rides down by the river, near that old shack where the workers leave seed at planting time." Susie then pointed in the direction she had seen Emily take.

"Thank you, Susie," Alex said as he and Colt quickly left the house.

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Colt followed Alex's lead. They did not speak as they rode at full gallop toward the dilapidated shack. As they approached they could see Emily's horse grazing nearby. Alex and Colt reined in their mounts at the entrance of the cabin and scanned the area for life. "Where do you think she is?" Colt asked as he dismounted and tied his horse to a nearby bush.

Alex shook his head as he joined Colt at the door. Colt was the first to enter and upon seeing the bloody scene he tried to stop Alex. It was already too late. Alex had seen his mother's body lying in the pool of her own blood.

"Mother!" Alex said as he kneeled to touch Emily's broken body. Tears brimmed in his dark eyes as he picked her up and placed her on the cot. Gently, Alex pushed back the matted hair from her face. Alex had thought his mother dead until a slight moan escaped from her bloodied mouth. He bent to hear her words. "Sentelle killed Quinton. Nicole was—" Emily never finished the sentence. Her struggle with life was over and Quinton's secret was safe.

Alex, overwhelmed by grief, did not comprehend Emily's statement. He laid his head against his mother's lifeless body and wept.

Quietly, Colt left the cabin. Alex needed this time with his mother.

Sentelle! Why hadn't he realized it before? He'd want revenge, all right. Hadn't Colt himself warned Nicole of that?

His eyes scanned the damp earth for signs of another set of horse tracks, and he found them just as Alex emerged from the cabin. Lucky it hadn't rained again that morning, or the tracks would have been washed away.

"Where do we go from here?" Alex asked, too shocked and pained by what he'd seen to think clearly.

Colt pointed to the river. "To the swamps. John Sentelle has Nicole, and I pray I'll not be too late." He was already untying his horse as he spoke.

Emily's words flashed through Alex's mind. Sentelle had killed Quinton, his mother, and now had Nicole.

"You take your mother back to Kensington and I'll go after them," Colt told him.

Alex shook his head and mounted his stallion. "Nothing can harm Mother now, but Nicole is in danger. I'm coming with you."

"All right," Colt said. He pointed to Sentelle's tracks and they set off.

Nicole was amazed at the awful condition of the cabin that had been her home for the first sixteen years of her life. She did not remember it ever being in such a state of disrepair. As Sentelle dragged her from the horse and carried her up the steps to the sagging porch, Nicole realized that it had not actually changed at all. She now saw it for the first time as it actually was, a hovel, not fit to call home. She had seen another way of life, her mother's life before she'd married Sentelle, and she hated him even more for what he had done to Danielle.

Sentelle brushed the cobwebs out of their way as they entered. He placed Nicole on the cot where she had slept for so many years and then went to set a fire in the fireplace. The smell of mildew permeated the air, and the kitchen utensils were coated with mold. Even her mother's rocker wore a film of mildew over its fine wood. Nicole held back tears. She'd not let Sentelle see her pain. This place brought back so many memories. So much misery had existed within the confines of these walls. It was here that she had been born and her fate settled. The secret that

would take years to come to light had assured that Nicole would not find the happiness she had so desired. But the blood of Danielle and Quinton flowed in her veins and they were courageous. Could she be less so? She would fight Sentelle to the very last, no matter the consequences.

When Sentelle left the cabin to get more wood for the fire, Nicole squirmed to the edge of the cot and managed to get her feet to the floor. She hobbled to the table, where Sentelle had left his knife. Turning her back, she grasped the metal blade, painfully cutting her palm in the process, but she continued her struggle. Nicole slipped to her knees and arranged the knife so that she could cut the bonds around her feet. She succeeded, though now found it difficult to regain her footing because of the added weight of her pregnancy. Using the wobbly table for support, she finally stood. She knew that if she could manage to free her hands, as well, she'd be able to escape Sentelle and hide in the swamps. When darkness descended, she would make her way back to Live Oak and safety. She worked with the knife, which cut into her flesh nearly as much as it did the leather strips that bound her, until her wrists were free. She turned to the door to make her flight and came face to face with a smiling John Sentelle. In her surprise she let go of the knife, which clattered to the floor.

"You really didn't think you could get away, did you?" he asked as he strolled into the room. "I wouldn't let a choice piece of gator bait slip away that easily."

Nicole felt her insides churn, and though her voice was husky from the long hours during which the gag had blocked her speech, she confronted Sentelle boldly. "Haven't you done enough damage without adding another murder to your crimes?"

"You didn't really think I would let you get by with

destroying my business, did you? There's no way in hell a DuPree can do that to me and get by with it. You're the last of 'em. The rich folks who think they're so much better than me. You don't know how much I hate the blood that flows in your veins."

Nicole's anger flared as he besmirched the name of the people so dear to her. "You think you know hate? You know nothing of it until you know how I despise you. You're nothing but trash. How dare you speak of kind and decent people in such a manner?"

Sentelle had had enough. He reached out and wound his hands into Nicole's raven hair and jerked her forward. He dragged her, kicking and screaming, from the cabin and cursed her. "We'll see what you think of me when you beg for your life."

Nicole fought and clawed every step of the way as Sentelle pulled her deeper into the swamps. She was tiring quickly, but she did not let Sentelle know. She was determined that he would never see weakness in her.

As they came to a dark, murky pond, Sentelle took a length of rawhide from his pocket and shoved Nicole against the roots of a large cypress at the water's edge. He secured her tightly to them and stepped back to observe his handiwork.

Nicole knew this place well. Her eyes searched the depths of the dark green water. This was the home of what the swampers called "El Grande," the giant bull alligator whose territory started in this still pond.

"Now, Miss High-and-Mighty. We'll see just how long it takes you to beg. Will it be when ole El Grande takes his first bite from your swollen body?" Chuckling, Sentelle seated himself nearby to wait.

Nicole glared at Sentelle while the man laughed. "You think you won't beg? Too much pride, just like Danielle

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and that lover of hers. But you will, once El Grande's jagged teeth begin to nibble at your tender flesh."

Sentelle rubbed his beard and gazed off into the distance. "Yep, Quinton thought he was too good to beg, but I showed him." He picked up a stick and took out his large hunting knife and began to whittle.

"What do you mean?" Nicole asked as she tried to free her hands from the leather.

Sentelle smiled triumphantly at Nicole as he said, "He wouldn't beg me to keep quiet about you being his daughter. All this time you thought he committed suicide because he'd found out about you. Ha! That's a laugh. I was the one to put the bullet through his head."

It was as if the breath had been knocked from Nicole. She had never suspected. Sentelle's disclosure stunned her. "You killed Quinton?"

"Just like I did that Chandler woman. All of you tried to use me. Danielle, you, Quinton, Emily Chandler—all of you thought you were too good for John Sentelle, and all of you are dead . . . or will be."

Numbed by shock, Nicole was slow to see the movement in the water, but when she did, she screamed, the sound echoing through the swamps, alerting Alex and Colt to where she was being held captive. The hoofbeats of their horses in turn alerted Sentelle that he'd best be off. The only way left to him was through the marshes of quicksand. He'd have to take his chance, he thought, and took to his feet.

Nicole was blind to all but the reptile moving through the murky water, the huge leathery tail moving back and forth. She twisted and pulled at the ropes that bound her, blood running down her hands. All of her concentration was bent on freeing herself, so she was unaware of Colt until she heard the shot and saw the gator, hit between the

eyes, struggle and finally die. Then Colt was at her side, loosening her bonds.

"You're safe now, little one," he said.

"Oh, Colt! Oh, Colt!" She could barely get the words out, her body shook so. "Take me home. . . . P-please, take me home."

Colt looked up at Alex and in that moment saw the hurt in the other man's eyes.

"I'll go after Sentelle. You take Nicole back to Live Oak," Alex said.

Nicole was startled by the sound of his voice. She saw his strained expression as he mounted the stallion, but could find no words to give her thoughts life. She looked from Alex to Colt, her true feelings evident in her eyes. Colt saw the love he had hoped she would feel for him someday follow Alex as she watched Alex ride away. He sighed and accepted that it would never be, no matter how much he wished it.

She turned to Colt and closed her eyes to shut out the sight of his pain. She had been cruel to him by denying her love for Alex all these months. It had given Colt false hope. He loved her deeply and had been her only true friend in her time of need. Nicole knew that she would not have survived without that friendship. He'd rescued her in New Orleans and helped her to win Live Oak. And what had she done to repay the debt she owed him? "I'm sorry, Colt," she said. "If there was any way I could change it, I would."

Colt pulled her into his arms and held her close—the gesture of a protective father. "I know, little one," he said softly before he released her.

As Alex left the clearing in Sentelle's wake, he looked back at the couple standing within each other's embrace

and realized that he had lost the woman he loved. All that was left to him was to see Sentelle punished for what he'd done to his mother and to Quinton. That he *could* do. Nearing the quicksand marshes, Alex heard a thrashing and stopped at the edge, to see that Sentelle was slowly sinking.

Sentelle, upon seeing Alex, stretched out his hand in supplication.

Alex dismounted and cautiously eased his way forward. He picked up a limb and tried to stretch it out to Sentelle. It was too short. Alex eased forward again, but soon realized that he himself was in danger of sinking.

Sentelle began to sink faster. His fear took control and he thrashed about wildly. "Help me, for God's sake. Don't let me die. Please save me. Please help . . ." One hand extended toward the azure sky, Sentelle slowly sank out of sight.

As the movement ceased, Alex watched the quicksand return to its natural form. His mind reflected on the scripture. "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord." It was over. John Sentelle would never harm anyone again. And for Alex, everything began to fall into place, only it was too late. He sat beside the now calm pool of quicksand and thought about the past. Gradually a scene began to play itself out in his mind. It had taken place years before in this swamp. He remembered a small skinny girl whom he'd helped bury her mother. That girl had been Nicole. Why hadn't he ever put the two together? Had he remembered, he'd never have thought her capable of the duplicity of which he'd accused her. She herself had been victim in all that had happened. She and Danielle and Quinton— and now his mother.

Alex stared into space, his mind turning over everything. He knew with certainty that Nicole would never forgive him. She would never be his. She would never carry his child as she now carried Colt's.



CHAPTER 22

Not even the movement of her baby dispelled the melancholy that overwhelmed Nicole. Emma and Sam had done all they could do by giving fully of their love and understanding. Finally, having exhausted the possibilities, they'd sent for Colt, now in New Orleans.

He arrived on Christmas Eve, bearing gifts for all. He'd gotten to know the Baileys these past months as they shared with him their feelings for Nicole. They were a decent and loving couple, and no real parents could have given more support or care to an offspring. So it was with the joy of a family reunion that Colt and Sam went out and cut a tree while Emma strung popcorn and tied velvet bows for the decorations. All three hoped that their efforts to make Christmas a festive occasion would cheer Nicole. After the tree was decorated and the Yule log burning brightly, Colt suggested that they open their gifts. Nicole thanked each of them for their presents to her, but the affair held little interest for her. An ache had begun in her back earlier that day and now encircled her abdomen.

Nicole had not mentioned it, but she suspected that her labor had begun. She didn't want to spoil the holiday for the others. Each of them had tried hard to make her happy. She appreciated their concern, but she could not bring herself to join in the festivities. As the last gift was placed on her lap, a sharp pain gripped her middle and she gasped. All eyes turned to her, and in an instant Emma and Colt were at her side.

Colt was pale as he bent over and picked up Nicole in his arms. "Your labor has begun, hasn't it, little one."

Nicole could only nod before another pain took hold. She arched her back and groaned as she held tightly to Colt's jacket lapels. He rushed her up the stairs and called for the midwife to be brought from her quarters.

Emma had raced ahead and was already turning down the covers of Nicole's bed when Colt entered the room. He laid Nicole gently on the soft mattress. As another pain slashed across her, she clasped Colt's hand. "Colt, you have always been so good to me. I wish I could love you the way you should have been loved. Forgive me, Colt, for hurting you."

Another pain tore through Nicole, and she cried out. A light film of perspiration formed on her brow. She was in a great deal of pain. "Colt," she cried, "if anything should happen to me, please take care of my child."

Colt felt his insides twist, an unbearable pain almost as real as Nicole's tearing. He could not witness her suffering, nor could he bear the awful foreboding that suffused his being. Nicole was going to die. She wanted it that way. She felt her life was worthless without Alex.

Colt knew that women died all the time in childbirth, even when they had the will to live. But what if you did not want to live? Colt asked himself.

Colt wiped the sweat from his face, which was as

contorted as Nicole's as another pain gripped her. He knew that he had to do something. As she cried out with another contraction, he rushed from the room and out of the house. He mounted his horse and headed at a full gallop to Kensington. Colt prayed fervently that Alex had not gone to spend the holidays in New Orleans.

As on the previous visit to Kensington, Colt pushed his way into the house and called loudly for Chandler. The door to the study opened to reveal an immaculate Alexander Chandler. He held a snifter of brandy in his hand and a look of surprise on his handsome face.

"Coltrane, is this the only way you know to enter a house?" The words held no rancor. He had begun to like the man even if he was his rival for Nicole's affections. Colt's feelings were honest and he was loyal, and that appealed to Alex. He knew that the man loved Nicole and was good to her, so it was with a sense of resignation that Alex accepted the situation.

"I don't have time for pleasantries, Chandler. I need your help."

Alex motioned Colt into the study and shut the door. "Can I offer you a brandy? It'll take the chill off."

"Didn't you hear me, man? I don't have time. Nicole has gone into labor, and I'm afraid she will die."

Alex's hand shook as he set down his glass. He cleared his throat and turned his back to Colt. He did not want him to see how the news affected him. "What's that got to do with me? You're the father of the child, so why aren't you with her instead of here, badgering me?"

Exasperated, Colt said, "My God, man. Are you stupid as well as blind?"

"Damn it, Coltrane. I've had about all I'm going to take from you. Go back to Live Oak where you belong. Don't

you have any sense of duty? It's your child to be born, not mine—though I wish to God it were."

Colt smiled for the first time since entering the house. The tension in his muscles eased as he picked up the brandy decanter and poured himself a drink. Turning, he held up the snifter. "To Alexander Chandler the fourth."

"I believe you have gone mad."

Colt swallowed his drink and threw the glass into the fireplace where it shattered. "To your son or daughter, expected any minute now."

"Coltrane, I would appreciate it if you would get out. This jest has gone far enough, don't you think? I'm sure Nicole needs you, if what you say is true."

Colt chuckled and looked squarely at Alex. "If you are too pig-headed to take the hint, I'll tell you in plain English. I'm not the father of Nicole's child, you are. Nicole and I have never been lovers."

"That, that can't be! I haven't touched Nicole in . . . in . . ."

Colt's smile faded as he remembered how Nicole had conceived this child. It had been an angry coupling for both of them. Nicole had told him. He could see the truth dawning on Alex. He remembered that night. There was no doubt in Colt's mind. No need to say anything further.

Alex sat down in the armchair. He covered his eyes with his hands to hide the emotions that came sweeping over him. The child was his, not Coltrane's. My God, the baby she is to give life to is mine!

When Alex finally looked up at Colt, it was as if he'd become a new man. It seemed to Colt that Alex had shed ten years in a matter of seconds. "What are you waiting for, Chandler? Do I have to carry you to Live Oak?"

Alex quickly followed Colt to the plantation. Emma and Sam were shocked to see the two men come amiably into

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the house. The Baileys would have expected nothing but continued rivalry from them. Both loved Nicole, but Nicole loved only Alex.

The two men stopped outside of Nicole's bedroom door. Briefly they clasped each other, and then Alex opened the door and went in. Colt stared at the closed door. In that moment he had given his greatest love offering to Nicole, the man she loved. The man Colt could now call his friend. Turning slowly, he walked back down the stairs to await the birth of the heir to Live Oak.

Alex leaned against the door as his eyes surveyed the room. Nicole was pale, and perspiration beaded her forehead. She mumbled something, but he was too far from her to hear. As he came near, she repeated it and he heard his name.

"I'm here, my darling," he said, and he kissed her forehead.

Nicole's hands sought out his. "Alex, you've come?"

"Yes, I've come, Nicole, and plan to stay until you send me away."

"But why?"

"Because I love you, Nicole, and have always loved you."

Nicole regarded him, her eyes communicating all the tender feelings locked inside her these past months.

The midwife shooed Alex to the door as Nicole screamed with the next contraction. "Ain't no place for you here now, Mr. Alex. I'll call you when the time is right."

Alex could not argue and soon found himself leaning against the door to Nicole's room, listening to her screams, sharing her pain in his anguish, pouring forth his love and his prayers for her and for their child. Alex felt himself being torn as a long, terrible cry pierced the air. Moments

later he heard the baby's wail. It was over. The midwife opened the door to let him in.

When he saw that Nicole was still breathing, that she was alive, he could have known no greater joy, until the midwife showed him his son. He touched the soft black down that covered the baby's head and looked at its tiny hands and feet, and tears of joy filled his eyes. He bent and kissed Nicole's lips. She opened her eyes and touched his tears. "I love you, Alex," she said.

Alex took her hand in his and kissed it. "My darling Nicole, I think I have loved you from the first moment I saw you with your face smudged with dirt of the swamps. I fought it hard and nearly ruined any happiness we could have had. If you will forgive me, I will try to make up everything to you."

"So you remember now. Alex, can you ever forgive me for all the things I've done to you? I should have trusted in your honesty and strength instead of turning away."

"We have both made terrible mistakes, Nicole, but they belong in the past. We now have a son and a future of happiness to look forward to. Nothing will ever come between us again, my love."

Nicole's eyes closed and she slept. Alex looked to the midwife. "She going to be all right. She's just tuckered out. Now, you go and get some rest. You look worse than dead yourself." She chuckled and shoved him from the room.

The Baileys and Colt were waiting at the foot of the stairs. His new family, Alex thought, his son's grandparents and uncle. Alex reached out and grabbed Emma and twirled her around. "I've got a son, and Nicole is going to be all right!"

There was a lot of slapping and patting of backs as the four made their way to the library, where each took a glass

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of New Orleans's finest champagne to celebrate the birth of Live Oak's heir. The Baileys and Alex were discussing the new baby while Colt sipped his champagne and silently toasted Nicole. My love, you have all you could want. I hope your future will be much brighter than the past. If the love I see in Alex's face is any indication, then all will be well. Aloud he said, "To the new heir and his lucky parents."

Sam and Emma raised their glasses, and Alex accepted the toast graciously.

He then raised his own glass and toasted the new grandparents and the baby's uncle. As the glasses were lowered there was a suspicious brightness in all of their eyes that they'd have denied were tears of happiness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cordia Byers was born in the small north Georgia community of Jasper and still lives there, with her husband, James, and their two children, Michelle and Michael. Cordia likes to think of her husband as being like one of the heroes in her novels. James swept her off her feet after their first meeting, and they were married three weeks later. After seventeen happy years together, Cordia is looking forward to at least another fifty.

From the age of six, Cordia's creative talents had been directed toward painting. It was not until late 1975, when the ending of a book displeased her, that she considered writing. That led to her first novel, HEATHER, which was followed by CALLISTA and NICOLE LA BELLE. She has recently completed her fourth book. Finding more satisfaction in the world of her romantic novels, Cordia has given up painting and now devotes herself to writing, researching her material at the local library and then doing the major part of her work from 11:30 P.M. to 3:00 A.M.

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